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An analysis of the biographical basis for the political, economic, social and literary theories of William Dean Howells

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL BASIS FOR THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND LITERARY THEORIES OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

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Preface

As a result of a study of some of Howells' social novels, I became interested in the question of whether there might be an autobiographical basis for his social-democratic notions, as expressed in his utopian novels of the 1890's. An investigation of the autobiographical works revealed evidence that Howells had developed through personal experiences an emotional attraction to the same socio-democratic values articulated philosophically in the utopian novels. This interest in the relationship between Howells' temperament and theories, as expressed in the 1890's, led me to extend my research to works and personal history belonging to periods of his life both before and after this time. It appeared reasonable to hypothesize that Howells developed a specific temperamental need for a system of equality. I therefore undertook a much more thorough study, in which I organized evidence from autobiographies, letters, poetry, etc., with a view toward determining the extent to which there is a relationship between personality and theory. More specifically, I attempted to narrow this

study by confining it to the investigation of Howells' concern with human equality--a concern which constantly appears in his work, as well as in his personal life. The focus, then, has been to determine the extent to which Howells' concern with human equality is a key to literary theory, literary practice, political theory, and social relations.

It was my judgment that a chronological structure would be of limited value in a work which involves an approach through an author's personality. Such a structure is helpful to the extent that it records the date of impact of specific events upon the personality, but in any study the percentage of recorded events is necessarily limited. We are more likely to find recorded impressions and flashbacks representing reactions to stimuli from times not precisely stated. Because the psychological approach is highly subjective--the structure should reflect the somewhat random, but revealing, operations of the mind. The data should be arranged according to the insight they provide to the subject's thought processes. The most logical organization, then, is that which organizes types of responses so that they may be used as different focal

points from which to probe the total personality. These responses often appear in the form of observations which have been articulated as answers to the original stimuli. Quite frequently there is a pronounced time span between the original experience and the observations concerning it. The mind has absorbed impressions caused by the experience and has reacted to them. But it may not until later life organize the materials of the experience into articulate form and meaning. It is perhaps significant that Howells himself was aware of such a process:

> The materials of knowledge accumulate from innumerable unremembered sources. All at once, some vital interest precipitates the latent electricity of the cloudy mass in a flash that illumines the world with a shadowless brilliancy and shows everything in its very form and meaning. Then the witness perceives that somehow from the beginning of conscious being he had understood all this before, and every influence and circumstance had tended to the significance revealed.[1]

This passage is perhaps even more significant when we realize that much of what Howells recognized as the realistic process was based on the assumption that through

[1]W. D. Howells, An Imperative Duty (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1896), pp. 103-104.

years of introspective analysis the writer could transpose personal data into objective material of usefulness to the reader. Thus there is an inseparable relationship between the man's personality and his theories. In the same way that one can find hints of the personality through the study of his objective observations, one can also find clues to his literary technique through the study of his personality. It seems appropriate, therefore, to approach this study through a structure which organizes a series of separate problems, all of which have a subjective basis, but all of which relate to objective theories.

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CHAPTER ONE

FLASHBACKS

And old, old dreams of childhood
Come thronging my weary brain,
Dear, foolish beliefs and longings:
I doubt, are they real again?[1]

[1] W. D. Howells, "Pleasure Pain," Poems (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1873), p. 25.

Much of what we know of Howells' temperament he himself records about his childhood many years later. A crucial problem for Howells, and therefore also for his biographers, is that of establishing the reality of the subjective world--of determining the extent to which recorded impressions, particularly those dating back to a time in the past, are accurate indicators of actual measurable experience. There are, therefore, inherent hazards in using a man's own testimony in drawing conclusions about his temperament. The very fact that there is a need for self-protection will cause a degree of bias on the part of the subject. Howells himself, in a letter to Mark Twain, indicates this problem: "Even you won't tell the black heart's truth."[2] Again, in Years of My Youth he says, " . . . the instinct of self-preservation will safeguard him from showing himself quite as he was. No man, unless he puts on the mask of fiction, can show his real face or the will behind it. For this reason the only real biographies are the novels, and every novel,

[2]Letter of Feb. 14, 1904. W. D. Howells, Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., 1928), II, 186.

if it is honest, will be the autobiography of the author and biography of the reader."[3]

Biographical evidence, then, is to be found in fiction, where the author is working through his own problems, although not in a self-conscious manner. Howells applies this theory specifically to the other authors. In regard to Fanny Burney he observes: "It is not to be supposed that she purposely drew herself in Evelina Anville. This is not the way of good art, though the end, the effect is self-portraiture. It is essential to the charm of a fictitious character that he or she who makes it in his or her image should not be aware of doing so; and no doubt Miss Burney kept well within her illusions."[4] And yet, if the study of fiction is useful because it reveals the author without the defenses of self-consciousness, so direct autobiography is useful because it records those influences and impressions which seem almost inseparable from the subject

[3]W. D. Howells, Years of My Youth (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1916), p. 127.

[4]W. D. Howells, Heroines of Fiction (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), I, 14.

himself. Particularly in regard to childhood, the memories are not so much an accurate record of history as a reservoir of suggestions and influences which remained important enough to be worth recalling in later years. The problem for the autobiographer then, is to trace these suggestions back to the personalities and historical facts which lend more concrete meaning to memories which seem almost unreal. Perhaps this is what Howells meant when he indicated that

> . . . when a boy is becoming a man his autobiography can scarcely be kept from becoming the record of his family and his world. He finds himself so constantly reflected in the personality of those about him, so blent with it, that any attempt to study himself as a separate personality is impossible. His environment has become his life, and his hope of a recognizable self-portrait must lie in his frank acceptance of the condition that he can make himself truly seen chiefly in what he remembers to have seen of his environment.[5]

And in the same way that it is necessary to recapture one's environment before understanding one's self, for Howells it is necessary to understand one's self before interpreting one's environment. Or rather, it is through the process of constant introspection that one learns

[5]Years of My Youth, p. 66.

enough about the human personality to have the data necessary for interpreting the motives of others. If such a method has flaws, it is, nevertheless, in Howells' opinion the only method available. Thus he asks in Tuscan Cities, " . . . if we do not judge men by ourselves, how are we to judge them at all?"[6] In another instance he says of Oliver Wendell Holmes, " . . . he studied the universe from himself. I do not know how one is to study it otherwise; the impersonal has really no existence . . . ."[7]

But for Howells the equating of others with one's self is more than a practical method of gathering evidence. It is the basic rationale for a whole moral theory in which each person has a worth which is exactly equal to that of any other individual. Those qualities within ourselves and factors without ourselves which have ultimate importance are those which are common to all humanity:

> The first thing you have to learn here below is that in essentials you are just like every one

[6]W. D. Howells, Tuscan Cities (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 17.

[7]W. D. Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintance (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900), p. 154.

> else, and that you are different from others only in what is not so much worth while. If you have anything in common with your fellow-creatures, it is something that God gave you; if you have anything that seems quite your own, it is from your silly self, and is a sort of perversion of what came to you from the Creator who made you out of himself, and had nothing else to make any one out of.[8]

The notion that all human beings have the same essential worth is deeply rooted in Howells' moral heritage. His great grandfather, "a Friend by Convincement," " . . . loved equality and fraternity, and he came out to America towards the close of the last century to prospect for these as well as for a good location to manufacture Welsh flannels . . . ."[9] The father was a Henry Clay Whig, or a constitutional anti-slavery man, and a follower of the religious doctrines of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Taking full charge of the religious education of his children, Howells' father impressed upon them not only the seriousness of their responsibilities to others, but the seriousness of their responsibilities to their own after-selves. Swedenborgian Christianity, then, as Howells understood it from

[8]W. D. Howells, A Boy's Town (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), p. 205.

[9]Ibid., p. 10.

childhood, involved two basic premises. First, that there is a moral obligation to others to love good and respect the worth of all human beings. And second, that there is a religious obligation to one's self to choose an eternal life in heaven. The former implies a philosophical attitude which encompasses one's obligation to all humanity. The latter suggests an emotional attitude of personal dependence upon one's Creator. Howells indicates that such precepts made serious impressions:

> . . . I am sure that in the father and mother . . . /religion/dignified life, and freighted motive and action here with the significance of eternal fate. When the children were taught that in every thought and in every deed they were choosing their portion with the devils or the angels, and that God himself could not save them against themselves, it often went in and out of their minds, as such things must with children; but some impression remained and helped them to realize the serious responsibility they were under to their own after-selves.[10]

Again, speaking of himself, Howells reports, " . . . the boy once heard his father explain to one of them that the New Church people believed in a hell, which each cast himself into if he loved the evil rather than the good,

[10]Ibid., p. 14.

and that no mercy could keep him out of without destroying him, for a man's love was his very self. It made his blood run cold, and he resolved that rather than cast himself into hell, he would do his poor best to love the good."[11] In the same manner Howells records that on moral questions he was always taught to take the side of any whose equal value was not being recognized. "It was very simple then; nobody was very rich, and nobody was in want; but somehow, as the boy grew older, he began to discover that there were differences, even in the little world about him; some were higher and some were lower. From the first he was taught by precept and example to take the side of the lower."[12]

We find, then, that Howells' childhood heritage contains specific ingredients of equalitarianism. He was taught the moral obligation not only to believe in the equality and fraternity of all men, but to actively support anyone deprived of equality. And he was taught the religious obligation to insure an eternal relationship with God, which he might do chiefly by fulfilling his

[11]Ibid., p. 12.

[12]Ibid., pp. 22-23.

moral obligation. His moral philosophy was at this stage derived externally--it was part of a value system taught to him by precept and example of his parents. But it became a frame of reference for later moral development. His religious attitudes were also taught to him, but his response to such teaching was not so much to develop a systematic philosophy as to develop a deep concern about his future relationship with God. Therefore, to a certain extent his religious heritage was internalized emotionally. While still a child, then, Howells was committed to the support of anyone deprived of equality, in part because of deeply felt religious obligations, and in part because of the mere habit of the moral value system practiced by his family.

CHAPTER TWO

RELIGION

I thought, "How terrible, if I were seen
Just as in will and deed I had always been!
And if this were the fate that I must face
At the last day, and all else were God's grace,
How must I shrink and cower before them there,
Stripped naked to the soul and beggared bare
Of every rag of seeming!" Then, "Why, no,"
I thought, "Why should I, if the rest are so?"[1]

[1] W. D. Howells, "Company," Stops of Various Quills (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895), n.p.

As an adult Howells continued to be concerned with his personal religious obligations. However, as his theological probing increased, he often discovered that his capacity to reconcile new discoveries with the faith of his childhood decreased. He particularly developed doubts concerning the extent to which he could depend upon an afterlife. In the following letter to his father, dated January 28, 1872, Howells indicates that he had thought that fulfilling one's moral obligation would automatically fulfill his religious obligation. Now he discovers that, according to Swedenborg, he can depend upon entering heaven only if he has certain theological beliefs:

> . . . for the past week we've suspended our theological readings. The fact is the subject has grown a little too exciting, and I should willingly never resume it if I did not think it a duty to do so. In Swedenborg I'm disappointed because I find that he makes a certain belief the condition of entering the kingdom of heaven. I always tho't that it was a good life he insisted upon, and I inferred from such religious training as you gave me that it made no difference what I believed about the trinity, or the divinity of Christ, if only I did right from a love of doing right. Now it appears to me from the Testament that Christ was a man directly, instead of indirectly, begotten by a divine father; and for this persuasion, which I owe to the reason given me of God, Swedenborg tells me I shall pass

> my eternal life in an insane asylum. This is hard, and I can't help revolting from it. I am not such a fool as to think I can do the highest good from myself, or that I am anything in myself; but I don't see why I cannot be humble and true and charitable, without believing that Christ was God. I am greatly disappointed, and somewhat distressed in this matter.[2]

In a subsequent letter, dated February 25, 1872, Howells indicates that even if there is hope of an afterlife, the type of afterlife Swedenborg describes offers very little to hope for: "I suppose that I understand Swedenborg very dimly, but if I do understand him, it seems to me that man's state hereafter, whether in bale or bliss, is one of less dignity than on earth--that there is less play for his powers, and that the very union of his will and intellect deprives him of individual consciousness, and cripples him--There are a thousand points I'd like to talk with you upon."[3]

Throughout his life Howells continued to be troubled by the need to believe in an afterlife such as he had depended upon in childhood. It is perhaps significant that in a letter of 1903, expressing a temporary renewal of hope

[2]Life in Letters, I, 165-166.

[3]To William Cooper Howells, Ibid., I, 167.

for an afterlife, such a life is equated with the world of childhood, where a person can feel certain of his importance and position:

> If you read old Alfred Russell Wallace's Man's Place in the Universe, as I've just been doing, you will see it too, for with the earth alone inhabited of all the planets and of all the stars, you will realize not merely the desirability but the practicality of some such round-up. With a universe full of man-bearing worlds, a Judgment Day was ridiculously inadequate and impossible for the settling of accounts. But Wallace gives us back the good old earth of our boyhood and more, too. Not only is everything on it for man's use and comfort, but all the heavenly bodies; and the earth is in their centre. It does not rehabilitate hell, but it makes me feel my importance, as I haven't for many a year . . . .[4]

Even after the death of his wife, Howells indicates his despair of ever seeing her again, although apparently he never quite stopped hoping: "I wish I could believe in a meeting with her, but she believed in none, and how can I?"[5]

As Howells developed religious doubts, especially in regard to an afterlife, the whole emotional and religious underpinning of his Swedenborgian Christianity crumbled

[4]To Samuel Clemens, Dec. 20, 1903, Ibid., II, 179.

[5]To William James, June 8, 1910, Ibid., II, 285.

from under him. That is, his ability to depend upon a certain relationship with his creator was weakened. This increased his sense of personal loneliness and vulnerability. The effect of this was to intensify an already existing moral theory concerning his relationship with other men. Therefore, ironically, the same equalitarian ideas which were in part a result of the Swedenborg-Christian influence became more important because he found an inadequacy in this same influence. The philosophical and moral theory of the Swedenborg-Christian school became increasingly crucial to the extent that the core of the religious and emotional underpinnings of this same school failed him. As he lost the emotional support of private religious experience, he began to depend more upon the support of shared human experience. It is perhaps a recognition of the psychological value of shared experience which led to the following half-joking observation in Suburban Sketches. The sense of identity with other human beings lends a kind of support which insulates one from the loneliness of an otherwise unbearable religious experience. " . . . enjoyment no more likes to be solitary than sin does, which is notoriously gregarious, and I dare say would hardly exist

if it could not be committed in company. The preacher, indeed, little knows the comfortable sensation we have in being called fellow-sinners, and what an effective shield for his guilt each makes of his neighbor's hard-heartedness."[6]

We find, therefore, that for Howells there is often a separation between the religious and the moral. Sometimes Christian life can be morally poisonous. Sometimes a normal humanitarian outlook is linked with a resignation concerning religious doubts. And sometimes we find statements like the following, indicating that inhumane social values result in ineffectual religious values: "There can be no doubt that at the heart of paganism the same plague festered which poisons Christian life, and which, while the social conditions remain the same from age to age, will poison life forever."[7] Likewise, in The Leatherwood God Howells describes the effect upon a community of a religious revival which is grounded in

[6]W. D. Howells, Suburban Sketches (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1874), p. 136.

[7]W. D. Howells, Roman Holidays, and Others (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1908), p. 59.

principles not only false, but morally corrupt:

> Day by day the faith in Dylks spread with circumstance which strengthened it in the converts; they accepted the differences which parted husband and wife, parent and child, and set strife between brothers and neighbors as proof of his divine authority to bring a sword; they knew by the hate and dissension which followed from his claim that it was of supernatural force, and when the pillars of the old spiritual temple fell one after another under his blows, they exalted in the ruin as the foundation of a new sanctuary. They drove the worshipers out of the material Temple, Methodists and Moravians and Baptists who had used it in common.[8]

Later in the same work the most reliable witness of the novel indicates that it is more important to respect others' rights to religious differences than to insist upon any given religious principles:

> ". . . so long as we look after our own souls, we can't do better than let others look after theirs in their own way."[9]

In still another novel, The Undiscovered Country, Howells deals with a character who hopes to find evidence of an afterlife by communicating with the dead. In the closing passage Howells indicates the necessity of being resigned

[8]W. D. Howells, The Leatherwood God (New York: The Century Co., 1916), pp. 74-75.

[9]Ibid., p. 153. The speaker is Squire Braile.

to the unknown and not insisting upon evidence of immortality:

> The grass has already grown long over Boynton's grave. They who keep his memory think compassionately of his illusions, if they were wholly illusions, but they shrink with one impulse from the dusky twilight through which he hoped to surprise immortality, and Ford feels it a sacred charge to keep Egeria's life in the full sunshine of our common day. If Boynton has found the undiscovered country, he has sent no message back to them, and they do not question his silence. They wait, and we must all wait.[10]

For Howells, then, religion can be so separated from morality that the one can be strictly proper while the other is savage. He appreciates this same recognition on the part of other authors. In an article on Mark Twain, Howells indicates that one of the qualities which he admires is Clemens' facility for bringing into ironic focus this contrast between "strict religiosity" and "savage precepts of conduct": "The strict religiosity compatible in the Southwest with savage precepts of conduct is something that could make itself known in its amusing contrast only to the native Southwesterner, and the revolt against it is as constant in Mark Twain as the enmity to

[10] W. D. Howells, The Undiscovered Country (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1880), p. 419.

New England orthodoxy is in Dr. Holmes."[11] One suspects that revolt against it is as constant in William Dean Howells as in Mark Twain.

[11] W. D. Howells, "Mark Twain, An Inquiry," Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, ed. Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p. 219.

CHAPTER THREE

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

Live my life over? I would rather not.
Though I could choose, perhaps, a fairer lot,
I cannot hope I should be worthier it,
Or wiser by experience any whit.
Being what I am, I should but do once more
The things that brought me grief and shame before.
But I should really fancy trying again
For some one else who had lived once in vain:
Somehow another's erring life allures;
And were I you, I might improve on yours.[1]

[1]"Some One Else," Stops of Various Quills, n.p.

Howells has often been accused of withdrawing from violence, of being both unable and unwilling to face it.[2] And yet, if it can be said that he withdraws from torment in its major forms, it can also be said that he brings out the full potential of torment in its minor forms. He is intensely sensitive to the power of psychological domination. He is fully aware of the destructive potential of mental cruelty. It is instructive to observe this intense sensitivity to subtle forms of domination and intolerance--for this sensitivity may constitute an emotional basis for one aspect of Howells' equalitarian theories. And perhaps there is no better way of studying his treatment of these most subtle forms of abuse than to analyze briefly some of his observations on the nature

[2]In this regard Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk state in William Dean Howells (Chicago: American Book Company, 1950), p. xxix, that "Inured as he was to poverty and hard work, he was as a boy, also as a mature man, unable to face the intenser forms of emotional suffering which seem to be a part of the 'real' world." A similar observation is made by Edwin H. Cady in "The Neuroticism of William Dean Howells," PMLA, LXI (1946), 229: "Howells never truly faced the violent and sordid facets of reality." The same general observation is explained in a different way by Henry Steele Commager, editor of Selected Writings of William Dean Howells (New York: Random House, 1950), p. xiii: "He had an English distrust of extremes, of display, of violence."

of women and on the subsequent effect upon the marital relationship. Howells once argued:

> Each great novelist invents or discovers a certain type of feminine nature which is his predominant if not his favorite type, although it is by no means his only type. He may wholly depart from it, and easily paint its opposite, or he may vary it, and disguise it, without really departing from it; but this type in its most distinctive form will characterize him in the reader's general impression.[3]

Perhaps it can be argued that Howells created two basic types--the young marriageable girl and the middle-aged woman. The former is essentially an attractive type. She is independent, sympathetic, self-respecting, and sometimes of a creative nature. The latter is essentially unattractive. She is dominating, narrow, somewhat selfish, and very wearing upon the nerves of those around her. Some of the women are mixtures, with present assets of the former, but with specific potential for developing into the latter. It is instructive to look briefly at samples or signs of these latter qualities, for Howells' observations about women indicate the extent of his sensitivity to subtle aggressiveness and lack of sympathy. In point

[3]"The Nature of Charles Reade's Heroines," Heroines of Fiction, II, 14.

is his speculation in Literature and Life about the temperamental qualities of "A She Hamlet"--in this case qualities far from subtle:

> As the niece of a wicked uncle, who in that case would have had to be a wicked aunt, wedded to Hamlet's father hard upon the murder of her mother, she would have made short work of her vengeance. No fine scruples would have delayed her; she would not have had a moment's question whether she had not better kill herself; she would have out with her bare bodkin and ended the doubt by first passing it through her aunt's breast.[4]

In Indian Summer he refers to the sharp scrutiny of a woman's eyes, as if it can be so intimidating to a man that he can hardly endure it:

> "Oh, nothing," he said, shrinking from the sharpness of that scrutiny in a woman's eyes, which, when it begins the perusal of a man's soul, astonishes and intimidates him; he never perhaps becomes able to endure it with perfect self-control. "I suppose a slight degree of excitement in meeting you may be forgiven me." He smiled under the unrelaxed severity of her gaze.[5]

In A Hazard of New Fortunes he speaks of woman's lack of sensitivity in forcing private matters into public

[4]W. D. Howells, "A She Hamlet," Literature and Life (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911), p. 138.

[5]W. D. Howells, Indian Summer (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1952), p. 220.

discussion: " . . . she was one of those women (they are commoner than the same sort of men) whom it does not pain to take out their most intimate thoughts and examine them in the light of other people's opinions."[6] And in The Landlord at Lion's Head there is the following most remarkable observation concerning the extent to which a disagreeable wife can interfere with a man's ability to extend professional sympathy to a counselee:

> It would have been easier if it had been an older man, who might have had a daughter of her age. But he was in that period of the early forties when a doctor sometimes has a matter-of-fact, disagreeable wife whose idea stands between him and the spiritual intimacy of his patients, so that it seems as if they were delivering their confidences rather to her than to him.[7]

It was suggested above that Howells developed two types of women, and that the younger type is essentially attractive whereas the older type is essentially unattractive. We might ask what happened to this young girl that her qualities of independence, sympathy,

[6]W. D. Howells, A Hazard of New Fortunes (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1952), p. 119. The character referred to is Mrs. Leighton.

[7]W. D. Howells, The Landlord at Lion's Head (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), p. 268.

self-respect, and love for creativity became degenerated into qualities of domination, selfishness, and narrowness. For Howells the answer seems to be that there is a confusion between the emotional need for self-development and the emotional need for sharing. When a woman has no respect for her own need for individual creativity, she attempts unconsciously to fill this need by making unreasonable demands upon somebody else's emotional capacities. In attempting to fill the need for creativity by insisting upon more sharing than is normal, she becomes overly demanding upon herself and upon the subject of her love. In refusing to recognize another's private creative need, she fails to extend sympathy for a most important goal in his life, and often mistakes it for material and social success. Also, instead of allowing herself moral growth, she expects merely moral vigilance, and her humanitarian capacities become narrowed rather than broadened. Thus, ironically, even her capacity for sharing, which she now solely relies upon, is warped. Perhaps an apt example of such reasoning is the following from Heroines of Fiction:

> She never could have duly appreciated either his brilliant mind or his tender heart, and she sets herself to thwart and baffle him with

> a success which the greatness of both his mind and heart render easy for a dull, narrow, pretty egotist.
>
> There can be nothing more tragical than the story of their unhappy married life, in which she harasses him with her paltry ambitions and resentments, and wears him out at last. Such women literally kill men, and the more generous the men the more easily they fall the prey of such women. It is nothing to Rosamond and can be nothing that her husband is recognized as a man of great scientific importance, and has the making of the highest professional fame in him.[8]

Although in our society this problem is more often associated with women than with men, it is one which must be recognized by both sexes. In analyzing William Black's Gertrude White he observes:

> . . . the lesson of her experience is not that you must not be an artist if you are a woman, but that if you are a man in love with that kind of woman, you must count upon her duplex instinct, which is by no means duplicity. If you offer her the fulfilment of one instinct, you must leave her to fulfil the other, and to demand its extirpation is stupid as well as cruel.
>
> . . . . It is enough for a man to ask that a woman shall merge her woman life in his, and more than most men can fully justify in marriage, but that she shall lose her artist life too is asking something monstrous.[9]

[8]"George Eliot's Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke," Heroines of Fiction, II, 66.

[9]"William Black's Gertrude White," Ibid., II, 223.

This concern appears also in Howells' fiction. In the following passage from a short story he presents an extreme form of the argument when he indicates that the lack of separate pursuits can bring a husband and wife so close together that the intensity of mutual interest can actually involve a kind of tax upon the emotions which is difficult to sustain. Even though it might be argued that this is not necessarily Howells' opinion, it can also be argued that if it is merely speculation, it indicates an intense imaginative sensitivity to the potential emotional tedium of a marriage of personalities too demanding of each other:

> One conclusion from my observation of the Alderlings during the week I spent with them was that it is bad for a husband and wife to be constantly and unreservedly together, not because they grow tired of each other but because they grow more intensely interested in each other. Children, when they come, serve the purpose of separating the parents; they seem to unite them in one care, but they divide them in their employments, at least in the normally constituted family. If they are rich, and can throw the care of the children upon servants, then they cannot enjoy the relief from each other that children bring to the mother who nurtures and teaches them, and to the father who must work for them harder than before. The Alderlings were not rich enough to have been freed from the wholesome responsibilities of parentage, but they were childless,

> and so they were not detached from the perpetual thought of each other.[10]

A similar observation can be found in Miss Bellard's Inspiration, a late novel. "' . . . she felt that I was all hers, and that she had a right to every atom, every instant of me. . . . But it was slavery.'"[11] This same work contains an analysis that it is a wish for a complete sense of identification which results in the demand for complete possession of another's personality:

> " . . . I know that when she's been the most impossible she's been the most devoted to me. She cared for me so entirely that she could not bear that anybody--no! any thing--else should have the least part of me. You used to believe I could paint? Or could have painted if I had kept on?"
>
> "You could have been a great painter."
>
> "Perhaps. But she broke it up."[12]

It is further explained: "'She wants to exact everything from her husband because she would like to give him everything--if she could.'"[13]

[10]W. D. Howells, "Though One Rose from the Dead," Questionable Shapes (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903), p. 179.

[11]W. D. Howells, Miss Bellard's Inspiration (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1905), p. 126.

[12]Ibid., p. 125.

[13]Ibid., p. 140.

Howells also analyzes the problem of psychological domination as it applies to other family relationships. In the following passage from April Hopes he refers to a mother who regards her daughter as her property, to be preserved as a status symbol to serve her. Or rather, she so identifies her satisfaction in her own accomplishments on behalf of her daughter with her pride in her daughter that in attempting to preserve her own creative role she also incidentally attempts to control another person's personality and life:

> She had made the girl her idol, and if, like some other heathen, she had not always used her idol with the greatest deference, if she had often expected the impossible from it, and made it pay for her disappointment, still she had never swerved from her worship of it. She suddenly asked herself, What if this young fellow, so charming and so good, should so wholly monopolise her child that she should no longer have any share in her?[14]

In Dr. Breen's Practice he refers to a mother who mistakes moral vigilance for moral growth. And after allowing such a posture to narrow her own life she now applies it to others in such a way as to interfere with their

[14]W. D. Howells, April Hopes, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1888), p. 145.

development: "She was an old lady, who had once kept a very vigilant conscience for herself; but after making her life unhappy with it for some threescore years, she now applied it entirely to the exasperation and condemnation of others. She especially devoted it to fretting a New England girl's naturally morbid sense of duty in her daughter, and keeping it in the irritation of perpetual self-question."[15]

Yet, it is specifically with the marriage relationship that Howells is most often concerned. For it is in this relationship that people most often inflict injury by expecting impossible things of each other. Perhaps the following observation from The Rise of Silas Lapham can be regarded as a typical summation of Howells' observations of the extent to which a husband and wife may deliberately wound each other. He refers to the "silken texture of the marriage tie" to indicate the necessary strength of a bond submitted to unnecessary stress:

> The silken texture of the marriage tie bears a daily strain of wrong and insult to which no other human relation can be subjected without

[15]W. D. Howells, Dr. Breen's Practice, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1881), p. 13.

> lesion; and sometimes the strength that knits society together might appear to the eye of faltering faith the curse of those immediately bound by it. Two people by no means reckless of each other's rights and feelings, but even tender of them for the most part, may tear at each other's heart-strings in this sacred bond with perfect impunity; though if they were any other two they would not speak or look at each other again after the outrages they exchange. It is certainly a curious spectacle, and doubtless it ought to convince an observer of the divinity of the institution. If the husband and wife are blunt, outspoken people like the Laphams, they do not weigh their words; if they are more refined, they weigh them very carefully, and know accurately just how far they will carry, and in what most sensitive spot they may be planted with most effect.[16]

It is instructive to notice how often in fiction Howells indicates that the woman in particular causes pain to her spouse. He refers to Mrs. Lapham as "yielding to the necessity a wife feels of making her husband pay for her suffering, even if he has not inflicted it,"[17] of Mrs. Gaylord as "the meek little wife, who has all the advantage of public sympathy" and who "knows her power over her oppressor, and at some tender spot in his affections or in his nerves can inflict an anguish that

[16] W. D. Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1915), p. 66.

[17] Ibid., p. 328.

will avenge her for years of coarser aggression,"[18] Mrs. Kenton as "no better than other wives in pressing to her husband's lips the cup that was not altogether sweet to her own,"[19] and Mrs. March as "one of those wives who exact a more rigid adherence to their ideals from their husbands than from themselves."[20] This is not to say that Howells disapproves of marriage. He often indicates very sympathetic views of the institution, and even seems to take the position that at its best it is a richer life experience than being alone. Such views are particularly well expressed in two of his short stories dealing with the Shakers, "A Day of Their Wedding" and "A Parting and a Meeting," in which he seems to indicate that it is better to risk life's griefs and share its disappointments than to escape into a celibate communal life, which is more free from emotional risk, but also

[18] W. D. Howells, A Modern Instance (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), p. 102.

[19] W. D. Howells, The Kentons (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1902), p. 14.

[20] A Hazard of New Fortunes, p. 81.

more devoid of emotional meaning.[21] It is not surprising, however, that he takes the position that marriage should not be considered an institution which automatically solves personal problems and insures eternal happiness. He is very sensitive to the problems and complexities of learning to think and feel together. And as has been indicated, he is intensely sensitive to dangers of the very subtle forms of domination. He places a high premium on his own sense of independence and highly resents even the most subtle form of infringement on this independence. Viewed in this manner it is perhaps not surprising that one of the comic characters in "A Sea Change or Love's Stowaway" should make the following ostensibly humorous observation:

A Little Ode

There was a youth,
He loved a maid.
He spoke the truth,
She fled affrayed.

Had he forborne
A little space,
Fate might have worn
Another face.

[21] W. D. Howells, Idyls in Drab (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1896).

In later mood
It might have fared,
That she had wooed,
And he been scared![22]

There is evidence in Howells' letters that there is a very personal basis for his sensitivity on the question of domination and subjection. He often makes apparently joking references to the relationship between himself and his wife. In a letter of 1875, he says to Mark Twain: "I'm delighted that you entered so thoroughly into the spirit of our family group. It shows Mrs. Howells and me in our true relation of domination and subjection."[23] Another letter, written in 1880, indicates perhaps a strain of seriousness in his lightness. "Mrs. Howells applauded the notion of the Club from the very first. She said that she knew one thing: that she was modest enough, any way. Her manner of saying it implied

[22]W. D. Howells, "A Sea Change or Love's Stowaway," The Complete Plays of W. D. Howells, ed. Walter J. Meserve, William M. Gibson and George Arms (New York: New York University Press, 1960), p. 275.

[23]Letter of Feb. 16, 1875, in Mark Twain-Howells Letters, ed. Henry Nash Smith, William M. Gibson, and Frederick Anderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), I, 66.

that the other persons you had named were not, and created a painful impression in my mind."[24] And in a letter of 1883, he reports: "None but the pitying angels will ever know, what Mrs. Howells said to me when she got me out of doors. She began by saying that I was always very lenient to her when she committed a blunder, & so she was not going to be hard on me. But I think the enormity of my crime must have grown upon her as she painted it to me. At any rate I never wish to be spared again."[25]

Even in more general areas he indicates his own sensitivity to attitudes of intolerance. In speaking of his reactions to the emotional climate of Indiana he said in a letter of 1889: "But I can feel an intolerance in the air. We are freer in the East, and say what we think. In West, I sh'd be first mobbed with praise and then, if I differed, with rotten eggs. People are freer from West to East. In the W. they are all terrible water drinkers--they must be topers or temperance, just as they must be

[24]To Mark Twain, May 28, 1880, in Life in Letters, I, 287.

[25]Letter of Nov. 19, 1883, in Twain-Howells Letters, I, 449.

saints or sinners. People are free only as they are rude, here."[26]

Although it cannot be argued that the data cited earlier indicating Howells' concern with emotional domination is necessarily autobiographical, it can be argued that there is biographical evidence that he was personally sensitive to this type of problem--and that his own need to be independent gave him an emotional sympathy with fictional characters feeling a similar need. It might be concluded, therefore, that his imaginative identification with people experiencing pain from subtle forms of abuse and intolerance is in part facilitated by a similar vulnerability to his own personal experiences. It should also be noted that in working through such problems in writing he developed a speculative approach, so that to a certain extent what might have been emotional resentment was replaced by philosophical analysis. He describes with amazing insight the psychological basis for emotional domination. Instead of merely showing the unfortunate effects of such domination, he attempts to account for

[26]To Mrs. W. D. Howells, Nov. 19, 1899, in Life in Letters, II, 116.

the cause. Therefore, although his original reactions to such experiences in his own life might well have increased his capacity for subjective identification, his subsequent handling of the problem probably increased his facility for objective observation. The same emotional sensitivity to the effects of the actions of others upon himself was, through the process of analysis, developed into an intellectual perception of the corresponding causes for these same actions. What may well have started as subjective reaction became objective theory--although still theory with a very personal basis. And perhaps a most important aspect of this theory is a specific, personal theory as to what constitutes strength. Having rejected domination he could not define strength as mere force. It had to take a more acceptable form. He therefore defined it as a level of morality, rather than as a degree of power. Strength, he says, is goodness. It is not necessarily to be measured according to a display of force. Such an observation is implied in a discussion of the Brontë sisters: "What she and her lonely sisters worshipped in the dreary vicarage at Haworth was manly strength; but from the father and brother, who were

the only men they knew, they could not imagine this apart from wilfulness and caprice and error. . . ."[27] It is suggested also in a key question posed by one of the fictional characters of The Landlord at Lion's Head: "'How do you know that a strong-willed man ain't a weak one?' Whitwell astonished him by asking. 'Ain't what we call a strong will just a kind of a bulldog clinch that the dog himself can't unloose? I take it a man that has a good will is a strong man.'"[28]

To have strength is to support another, not to dominate another. It was suggested above that Howells' intense sensitivity to subtle forms of domination and intolerance might constitute an emotional basis for one aspect of his equalitarian theories. It should be suggested here that in defining strength as a moral quality, Howells is laying the foundation for a theory of humanitarianism. He is suggesting a relationship of mutual support, which can be regarded as an aspect of equalitarianism. Whereas originally he objected to strength

[27]"The Two Catherines of Emily Brontë," Heroines of Fiction, I, 229.

[28]The Landlord at Lion's Head, p. 297.

in its misuse, ultimately he accepted it by redefining it in accordance with a personal need. Thus the same sensitivity which resulted in an emotional need to be independent was transposed into an analytical theory of psychological humanitarianism.

It has been indicated that Howells felt acutely the need for emotional independence. It is instructive to notice, however, that at the same time, he felt a corresponding need for the security of emotional closeness to others. This need was manifested particularly in his highly individual reports of homesickness. Howells' memory of homesickness haunted him even in later life when he wrote his autobiographies. He refers to the mere prospect of absence from home as painful. In Years of My Youth he recalls one such prospect: "For me, a terrible homesickness fell instantly upon me--a homesickness that already, in the mere prospect of absence, pierced my heart and filled my throat."[29] He further reports that during the time of his absence he suffered "an anguish of Homesickness"[30]

[29]Years of My Youth, p. 61. Almost identical reports can be found in My Year in a Log Cabin.

[30]Ibid.

and that he kept thinking of his family, particularly of his mother: "I had every fact of the cabin life before me; what each of the children was doing, especially the younger ones, and what, above all, my mother was doing, and how she was looking . . . ."[31] At the same time he reports a similar experience, which was also painful. He refers to "miserable tears" and "suffering" and concludes that "the homesick will understand how it was that I was as if saved from death."[32]

His personal testimonies seem to indicate a need for emotional closeness and security. In earlier years it was particularly in the love of his mother that he found comfort and escape from fears, illnesses and other troubles. He says of her in Years of My Youth: "She was not only the center of home to me; she was home itself, and in the years before I made a home of my own, absence from her was the homesickness, or the fear of it, which was always haunting me."[33] In A Boy's Town he refers to the sense of security resulting from his

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., p. 63.

[33] Ibid., p. 23.

mother's care during illness: "But there was rich compensation for this mild suffering in the affectionate petting which a sick boy always gets from his mother when his malady takes him from his rough little world and gives him back helpless to her tender arms again."[34]

Even during his adult life he reports with apparent sincerity his very meaningful memories of the affectionate care of his mother. In referring to an illness while in Venice he writes to his father in 1862:

> . . . I did not lack for anything during my sickness. For anything? O, surely, for home, and home, and home! For voices, for steps, for touches, for tenderness that made sickness an empire, when I was with you. We are so eager to fly away from the nest, (God forgive us,) when we get our wings fledged, and when we cannot fly back again with our poor broken plumes--that is the sad time. Do you know, I thought all through this fever, of a fever that I had in Hamilton when I was a very little child, and used to doze upon the old settee, and mother would come and kiss me, and ask me if I had slept.[35]

[34]A Boy's Town, p. 236.

[35]Letter of March 7, 1862, in Life in Letters, I, 52. It should be noted, however, that he does not always indicate that he wished to return home. On at least one occasion he indicates that he had been miserable there, or at least in Jefferson, one of his childhood homes. On p. 89 of the above listed work he states: " . . . I have not yet in the three years shaken off my old morbid

Even in very late life Howells recalls the devotion he felt for his mother. In a letter written in 1910, he particularly cherishes her manner of making her children feel that they belonged to her. "How did she ever get through all the work she did and yet make us each feel that she was peculiarly and most devotedly his or her mother? . . . She has been dead more than forty years, but I still dream of her as alive and contemporary with the living people of this day."[36]

Although in earlier years it was with his family that he found personal closeness, in later years he also found and valued this same relationship with friends and acquaintances. Perhaps typical is the following experience with a fellow traveler, reported in a letter of 1861: "I had on my way the company of a little old lady from London, who got in at Paris, and who was so delighted at my speaking

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horror of going back to live in a place where I have been so wretched . . . . It cannot change so much but I shall always hate it." This is apparently, at least in part, a reference to a memory of an illness he had experienced there. See pp. 13 and 14 of the same work.

[36]To Joseph A. Howells, March 10, 1910, in Life in Letters, II, 282.

English to her that she executed a little comical pas seul in the car. She was going to Heidelberg to see her son, who was sick there, and she told me nearly all her family history. I was equally confiding, and the dear old creature took pity on me so far from home, and was as tender of me as could be."[37]

It may be that the need for the close emotional support of other people was not more acute for Howells than for the average individual. It is possible that he was simply more perceptive in recognizing what his needs were--and more articulate in expressing them to others. It is even possible that to some extent he made the above remarks because he felt they would bring comfort to somebody else. However, it can be argued that, whatever the degree of this need for him, he recognized it as need of central importance for himself--and, furthermore he concluded it was a need of central importance for all humanity. And when in the 1890's he wrote his utopian romances, he transposed this basic assumption into a theory for an ideal society--a society which he felt would

[37] To William Cooper Howells and family, Dec. 7, 1861, Ibid., I, 42.

preserve a recognition of the need for emotional closeness similar to that found in the family relationship. Thus we find that in speaking of the Altrurian system Mr. Homos says in A Traveler from Altruria: "'Now a man is born and lives and dies among his own kindred, and the sweet sense of neighborhood, of brotherhood, which blessed the golden age of the first Christian republic is ours again.'"[38] And in the same work he says, "'If you can imagine the justice and impartiality of a well-ordered family, you can conceive of the social and economic life of Altruria. We are, properly speaking, a family rather than a nation like yours.'"[39] In a sense, then, the equalitarian order which Howells deems ideal is founded in a recognition of a personal emotional need for the close support of persons around him.

It has been observed that Howells had the psychological need for the emotional support of humanity, particularly of those very close to him. It was also observed that he had the psychological need for emotional independence,

[38]W. D. Howells, A Traveler from Altruria (New York: Sagamore Press Inc., 1957), p. 190.

[39]Ibid., p. 191.

particularly in regard to these same people, whose very closeness might involve emotional stress. It just happened that for Howells both needs were of exceptional importance. It might be asked, what happens to a man who has potentially conflicting needs and who probably to some extent recognizes the dilemma. One possibility is that he may find it important to resolve the conflict by establishing a theory of society which appears to some extent to recognize and serve both needs without apparent inconsistency. And perhaps this is what Howells did when he established the fictional Altrurian community, where the artist is the ideal type. For Howells an artist is any individual who finds work which he loves and can do well, and who then devotes his energy to doing this work in the service of others.[40] As an artist he preserves his independence in the sense that he is able to do his own work and make his own decisions in accordance with the inspirations of his temperament. But as an artist he recognizes the moral obligation to do this work for the benefit of others. In regard to the means of approaching

[40]See Ibid., particularly pp. 185-188.

his work he may preserve the values of independence and individuality. In regard to the end of his work he must preserve the values of self-sacrifice and sharing. It was suggested above that the close family structure of the equalitarian order of Altruria is founded in a recognition of a personal emotional need. It is suggested now that Howells' concept of the artist's position in this order is in part derived from a recognition of a potential conflict in his own temperamental needs--a conflict between the need for independence and the need for dependence. And perhaps this paradoxical nature of the role of the artist is nowhere better expressed than in My Literary Passions, where Howells indicates he was attracted to Tolstoy's theory that every laborer should be "master of himself and servant to every other."[41]

[41]W. D. Howells, My Literary Passions and Criticism and Fiction (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), p. 184.

CHAPTER FOUR

ISOLATION

Ah, you cannot befriend me, with all your
love's tender persistence!
In your arms' pitying clasp sole and
remote I remain,
Rapt as far from help as the last star's
measureless distance,
Under the spell of your life's
innermost mystery, Pain.[1]

* * *

Friend, neighbor, stranger, as the case may be,
You who are sitting in the stall next me,
And listening also to this pitiless play
That says for me all that I would not say,
And follows me, however I wind about,
And seems to turn my whole life inside out:
I wonder, should I speak and be the first
To own just where in my soul it hurt worst,
And you revealed in yours the spot its flame
Scorched fiercest, if it might not be the same.[2]

[1]"Solitude," Stops of Various Quills, n.p.

[2]"Sympathy," Ibid., n.p.

An important aspect of Howells' thinking is his accounting for the suffering in the world. It is during suffering that we are most likely to feel alone. It is during suffering that we are most in need of human sympathy. What, then is the function of human misery--to isolate us or to unite us? How do we respond to pain? Apparently Howells feels that the initial effect of private trouble is to cause us to feel isolated. We believe that we are alone because we believe that our pain is unique and that therefore our state is different from that of all humanity. We suffer, not only from the problem itself, but from the sense of isolation from all meaningful human sympathy and understanding. Therefore, each must suffer alone before he realizes that he is a part of the common suffering of all humanity. Such reasoning is expressed by the omniscient narrator of The Rise of Silas Lapham:

> . . . she showed him into the reception-room, which had been the Protestant confessional for many burdened souls before their time, coming, as they did, with the belief that they were bowed down with the only misery like theirs in the universe; for each one of us must suffer long to himself before he can learn that he is but one in a great community of wretchedness which has been

> pitilessly repeating itself from the foundation of the world.[3]

Howells further indicates that in regard to our own trials, we have the need for the sympathy and support of others--but in regard to the trials of others, we may find it difficult to extend such support. To extend support is all the more difficult if we feel in part responsible for the trouble, for then there is a greater probability that the problem will return directly to us. Yet, if we refuse to lend support, we will increase another's suffering, for it is in indicating that we are above such pain that his pain will become unbearable. We find these views repeatedly indicated in Howells' works. In The Landlord at Lion's Head it is noted by the narrator: "People adjust themselves to their trials; it is the pretense of the witness that there is no trial which hurts. . . ."[4] In A Foregone Conclusion a reliable witness suggests the tendency of hesitating to come close to those in trouble: "'But we have a repugnance to all

[3]The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 336.

[4]The Landlord at Lion's Head, p. 258.

doomed people, haven't we?'"[5] Again, in The Rise of Silas Lapham, the narrator refers to a situation where a character had increased another person's pain by standing aloof and refusing to share his humility:

> He asked himself, with a thrill of sudden remorse, whether, when Lapham humbled himself in the dust so shockingly, he had shown him the sympathy to which such abandon had the right; and he had to own that he had met him on the gentlemanly ground, sparing himself and asserting the superiority of his sort, and not recognising that Lapham's humiliation came from the sense of wrong, which he had helped to accumulate upon him by superfinely standing aloof and refusing to touch him.[6]

Although Howells recognizes that it is difficult to extend emotional support to those in need of it, he nevertheless believes that we have an obligation to do so. The question, then, is how can we best do so. And for Howells the answer is, to share the practical problems of the common lot. We can help others only in areas where we need some help ourselves, for it is in these areas that our sympathies are honest rather than condescending. It is in situations where there is a kind of equality of need that we approach

[5]W. D. Howells, A Foregone Conclusion (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1875), p. 154.

[6]The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 298.

each other with a respect for equality of human worth. If we attempt to withdraw from the common needs by being above them, our sympathies are warped by dishonesty. If we attempt to withdraw from the common needs by simply being apart from them, our sympathies are warped by disuse. Thus we find statements like the following from Annie Kilburn: "' . . . it is difficult to help others when we cease to need help ourselves.'"[7] And again: "'Because sympathy--common feeling--the sense of fraternity --can spring only from like experiences, like hopes, like fears.'"[8] In other instances Howells objects to the theories of Thoreau and Tolstoy only to the extent that they attempted to isolate themselves from the world. He feels that in isolation one not only avoids the obligation to work with others to improve the world, but also eventually allows deterioration of his own capacities, for he, too, needs the support of humanity. Of Thoreau's hermitage he says: "It is no solution of the problem; men are not

[7]W. D. Howells, Annie Kilburn (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), p. 169.

[8]Ibid., p. 65.

going to answer the riddle of the painful earth by building themselves shanties and living upon beans . . . ."[9] And of Tolstoy he explains: "If there is any point on which he has not convinced my reason it is that of our ability to walk this narrow way alone. Even there he is logical, but as Zola subtly distinguishes in speaking of Tolstoy's essay on 'Money,' he is not reasonable. Solitude enfeebles and palsies, and it is as comrades and brothers that men must save the world from itself, rather than themselves from the world."[10] For Howells the life of every individual is so inevitably related to the life of every other individual that it is necessarily impossible to live for one's self alone. Even if one fails to recognize this fact and attempts to isolate himself, he will surely affect and be affected by the lives of others. One's moral problem is to recognize this fact so that he will be more deliberate about the manner in which he affects the lives of others and will not do them an injustice by pretending he has no responsibility. Thus we frequently

[9] Literary Friends and Acquaintance, p. 58.

[10] My Literary Passions and Criticism and Fiction, p. 184.

find statements like the following from A Woman's Reason, indicating the impossibility of living in isolation: "She is the same, and yet not quite the same; for one never endures or endeavors to one's-self alone . . . ."[11] In The Shadow of a Dream can be found this same philosophy of the interrelated nature of people's actions, " . . . nothing any one did or suffered could be done or suffered to one's-self alone . . . ."[12] Similar observations are made by two of the characters in A Modern Instance. Of particular significance is the statement of the moral obligation to help bear the burdens of others. One such statement is by Atherton:

> "I agree with you," said Atherton, playing with his spoon. "You know how I hate anything that sins against order, and this whole thing is disorderly. It's intolerable, as you say. But we must bear our share of it. We're all bound together. No one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state--or religious state; it's the same thing. Every link in the chain feels the effect of the violence, more or less intimately. We rise or fall together in Christian society. It's strange that it should

[11] W. D. Howells, A Woman's Reason (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1883), p. 466.

[12] W. D. Howells, The Shadow of a Dream (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1901), p. 151. Spoken by Basil March as narrator.

> be so hard to realize a thing that every experience of life teaches. We keep on thinking of offences against the common good as if they were abstractions.[13]

In the same novel a similar position is taken by Ben Halleck:

> "Well,--I don't like being mixed up with other people's unhappiness, Ben. It's dangerous."
> "I don't like it either. But you can't very well keep out of people's unhappiness in this world."[14]

And perhaps the most beautiful passage on this point is the observation in April Hopes in regard to the fact that one often finds some alien concern can come into his life and torment him with more anxiety than any affair of his own: "This is, perhaps, a hint from the infinite sympathy which feels for us all that none of us can hope to free himself from the troubles of others, that we are each bound to each by ties which, for the most part, we cannot perceive, but which, at the moment their stress comes, we cannot break."[15]

Eventually our fundamental emotional nature will

[13] A Modern Instance, p. 474.

[14] Ibid. p. 340. The speakers are Olive and Ben Halleck.

[15] April Hopes, p. 476.

instinctively respond in accordance with the law that we are bound by our common humanity and must to some extent sacrifice our individual self-centered need out of recognition of the common need. And even if we manage to escape recognition of this obligation under circumstances of happiness and health, we will not escape it under circumstances of misery and death. The spectacle of suffering, especially death, will humanize through the sympathies, for this will jolt us into a recognition of our common doom. The role of suffering, then, is a strategic one for Howells. It is to unite us in a necessary recognition of our common humanity and therefore to broaden our sympathies to the extent that we recognize our moral obligation to deny ourselves for the benefit of others. "Perhaps one of the reasons why sickness and death are in the world is that they humanise through the sympathies the nature that health and life imbrute. They link in the chain which must one day gall every mortal and strong and happy with the weak and sorrowing, and unite us in the consciousness of a common doom if not the hope of a common redemption."[16] And again:

[16]The Shadow of a Dream, p. 85. Spoken by Basil March as narrator.

"'Death won't let us escape . . . /ties/ even if life will' . . . and for the first time I had a perception of the necessary solidarity of human affairs from the beginning to the end, in which no one can do or be anything to himself alone."[17]

In Howells' thinking, then, there is a kind of dualism, or perhaps a transition, in regard to the function of pain. At first, even with love and sympathy one is basically alone "under the spell of our life's innermost mystery, Pain."[18] And in Howells' personal life this pain was sometimes of dominant importance. His letters and autobiographies make frequent mention of his preoccupation with sicknesses and his fears of sickness and death. In one reminiscence he reports self-consciously: "I have hesitated to make any record of this episode, but I think it essential to the study of my very morbid boyhood, and I hope some knowledge of it may be helpful to others in like suffering. Somehow as a child I had always

[17]Ibid., p. 88. Also spoken by Basil March as narrator.

[18]"Solitude," Stops of Various Quills, n.p. Refer to epigraph of this chapter.

had a terror of hydrophobia . . . ."[19] And elsewhere he refers to his boyhood fear of death. He speaks of it as "perverse fear," as "increasing torture," and as "agony" which was "too great for him to bear alone":

> . . . somehow it came into his mind that he was going to die when he was sixteen years old. He could then only have been nine or ten, but the perverse fear sank deep into his soul, and became an increasing torture till he passed his sixteenth birthday and entered upon the year in which he had appointed himself to die. The agony was then too great for him to bear alone any longer, and with shame he confessed his doom to his father.[20]

However, this emotional preoccupation with personal suffering apparently becomes transposed into an analytical theory regarding the purpose of all human suffering. In the final analysis our closest bond is our unity in sharing deepest pain, for it is this pain which ultimately affects every human soul in the same manner.[21] The very pain which initially causes isolation is the agent which

[19] Years of My Youth, p. 91.

[20] A Boy's Town, p. 204. For additional examples see Years of My Youth, pp. 19, 80, 92, 93 and 94; and Life in Letters, I, 22 and 49.

[21] "Sympathy," Stops of Various Quills, n.p. Refer to epigraph of this chapter.

binds men to one another. It reminds each of his inability to survive alone. It forces him to recognize the necessity for interpersonal relationships of mutual support. It commits him to a moral obligation to risk his own happiness for the sake of those who are suffering. For Howells, then, the belief in the obligation to take moral risks is deeply imbedded in his own personal feeling that the burdens of life, particularly those involving sickness and death are so oppressive that the individual would be crushed without the support of other human beings. And there is biographical evidence, such as that cited above, that this concern began with his own intense reactions to his illnesses. He developed an objective analytical approach as a method of combating his own fears: "In self-defense I learnt to practise a psychological juggle; I came to deal with my own state of mind as another would deal with it, and to combat my fears as if they were alien."[22]

If Howells is willing to justify moral risks, such as supporting others in pain, he is nevertheless

[22]Years of My Youth, p. 94.

hesitant to justify physical risks, particularly the violent risks such as war and unlawful striking. In regard to a strike he observes, "I come back to my old conviction that every drop of blood shed for a good cause helps to make a bad cause."[23] In Literature and Life he refers to "that unfailing American kindness which I am prouder of than American valor in battle . . . ."[24] And perhaps the fundamental emotional tone of the short story "Editha" may be regarded as a typical Howells protest against war. Certainly the story is written in such a way that there is an unsympathetic view toward Editha's attitude of glorification of war and a sympathetic view toward George's reservations about it. The following passage is typical of the latter: "'It isn't this war alone; though this seems peculiarly wanton and needless; but it's every war--so stupid; it makes me sick. Why shouldn't this thing have been settled reasonably?'"[25]

[23]To Wm. Cooper Howells, July 10, 1892, in Life in Letters, II, 25.

[24]"From New York into New England," Literature and Life, p. 237.

[25]W. D. Howells, Between the Dark and the Daylight (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), p. 129.

And when Howells envisioned his ideal community he not only set up conditions which he felt eliminated such violent physical risks as war, strikes, and crime. He eliminated economic chance.[26] He even eliminated the danger of wild beasts, which perhaps indicates most of all the extent of his reactions against physical risks.[27]

It might be asked, what happens when Howells' views concerning moral courage and physical courage come into conflict. That is, if, in order to fulfill one's moral obligation to serve the needs of others, one needs to take great physical risk, which value system takes precedence? Apparently for Howells the moral obligation takes such precedence that the physical risk is justifiable. And yet, apparently the notion of physical risk is so repellant that he regards the action as immoral and the system of society allowing such action as uncivilized. This is the very conflict reported in Through the Eye of the Needle:

[26] A Traveler from Altruria, p. 203.

[27] W. D. Howells, Through the Eye of the Needle (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), p. 165.

> One orator after another rose and praised the self-sacrifice of the sailors. I was the proudest when the last of them referred to Aristides and the reports which he had sent home from America, and said that without some such study as he had made of the American character they never could have understood such an act as they were now witnessing. Illogical and insensate as their system was, their character sometimes had a beauty, a sublimity which was not possible to Altrurians even, for it was performed in the face of risks and chances which their happy conditions relieved them from. At the same time, the orator wished his hearers to consider the essential immorality of the act. He said that civilized men had no right to take these risks and chances. The sailors were perhaps justified, in so far as they were homeless, wifeless, and childless men; but it must not be forgotten that their heroism was like the reckless generosity of savages.[28]

It was suggested in an earlier chapter that Howells had a need to defend himself against the domination of others, particularly emotional domination. It was suggested in this chapter that he preferred not to believe in the risk and violence of fighting. It was also suggested in this chapter that he believed in the moral obligation to deny one's self for the benefit of others.

[28]Ibid., p. 149. This report is made by Eveleth Strange, wife of Aristides Homos. The question is whether the sailors, who had been abused while on ship, should stay in Altruria, or take further risk so that the Captain and his wife might return to their children.

It can be argued that there is a potential conflict between the Howells of this chapter and the Howells of the earlier chapter. On the one hand he believes that he has no right to withdraw or to protect himself from the emotional problems of others. On the other hand he values his own emotional independence, particularly against allowing other people's personalities to become overbearing. Also, on the one hand he is reluctant to sanction the risk and violence of fighting for his rights. On the other hand he is uncommonly sensitive to what is oppressive or to what might constitute an infringement on his rights. In both instances from the standpoint of any one individual there is the danger of expecting one's self to give so much that he reaches the point of resenting the demands of others. He may feel that he is doing all of the giving while others conveniently do all of the taking. How, then, does one solve such a dilemma? One possibility is to so educate others to one's own point of view that they must act according to the same set of rules. And perhaps it can be argued that Howells attempts to do this. There is a didactic element in his theories of fiction:

> Neither arts, nor letters, nor sciences, except as they somehow, clearly or obscurely, tend to make the race better and kinder, are to be regarded as serious interests; they are all lower than the rudest crafts that feed and house and clothe, for except they do this office they are idle; and they cannot do this except from and through the truth.[29]

It can be argued, then, that there is a good possibility that much of Howells' repeated insistence upon teaching his equalitarian value system is grounded in his own highly personal needs. He faces the dilemma of the sensitive temperament whose vision is higher and deeper than average, but whose skin is thinner. He envisions a system which he believes has less physical risk and more moral support, therefore minimizing life's pain. But he finds it impossible to practice his theories alone without increasing his own pain, the very problem that was already so acute that it started his theorizing. Although not quite a pacifist, his problem is very much like that of a pacifist, whose only hope of surviving in a warlike system is to proselytize.

[29]"Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, p. 87.

CHAPTER FIVE

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC THEORY

Old fraud, I know you in that gay disguise,
That air of hope, that promise of surprise:
Beneath your bravery, as you come this way,
I see the sordid presence of To-day;
And I shall see there, long ere you are gone,
All the dull Yesterdays that I have known.[1]

[1]"To-morrow," Stops of Various Quills, n.p.

Howells' works often indicate concern with the question of whether ours is a world of mere chance, of random fate, or whether there is basically a guiding law of cause and effect. One aspect of this general concern is his specific probing regarding the extent to which there is a moral law. To what extent are the incidents of human life a logical consequence of human motives and actions? To what extent do given human experiences presuppose human thoughts and feelings of the same quality? Will tomorrow's results reflect that yesterday's deeds germinated in accordance with the operation of logical moral principles? Much of the discussion of this subject is found in Howells' fiction, and although it cannot be argued that any particular viewpoint is necessarily the author's opinion, it can be argued that such evidence indicates the extent of the author's concern about the subject. It can further be speculated that to the extent that there are consistencies in the trends of thought separately indicated, there is a high probability that such thoughts are the result of the author's interest in working out the problem for himself.

At times we observe that there is apparent chaos

in the moral world. There seems to be an absence of control by an omnipotent ruler, an absence of perceptible purpose. Effect does not follow cause in the logical and direct manner that can be observed in the material world. And yet the conclusion seems to be that there is a controlling principle in the moral world. It is simply difficult to perceive because the law is so large and the patterns of its operations so complex, that it is only at rare moments in a person's lifetime that his limited mind can catch such a view of it that he perceives its total pattern. We find, therefore, such observations as the following from A Hazard of New Fortunes, in which is described the apparent chaos, lawlessness, and godlessness of the moral events of the universe as they are perceived by the mind of a human being too finite to comprehend infinite purpose:

> Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect; the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky; and then the fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity, the mutilation, the destruction, the decay of the weaker. The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, godless; the absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder, and the violent struggle to

> subordinate the result to the greater good, penetrated with its dumb appeal the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enwrapped to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead.[2]

In The Son of Royal Langbrith it is again observed that the sequence of events in the moral world follows no obvious logic or purpose. However, the narrator suggests that the purpose is there, but its operations are of such cosmic vastness that man's limited perspective can only rarely catch glimpses of the total pattern:

> Life is never the logical and consequent thing we argue from the moral and intellectual premises. There ought always to be evident reason in it; but such reason as it has is often crossed and obscured by perverse events, which, in our brief perspective, give it the aspect of a helpless craze. Obvious effect does not follow obvious cause; there is sometimes no perceptible cause for the effects we see. The law that we find at work in the material world is, apparently, absent from the moral world; not, imaginably, because it is without law, but because the law is of such cosmical vastness in its operation that it is only once or twice sensible to any man's experience. The seasons come and go in orderly course, but the incidents of human life have not the orderly procession of the seasons; so far as the sages or the saints are able convincingly to affirm, they have only the capricious vicissitudes of weather.[3]

[2] A Hazard of New Fortunes, pp. 199-200.

[3] W. D. Howells, The Son of Royal Langbrith (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904), p. 282.

In The World of Chance this same observation concerning the operation of moral law is applied specifically to the realm of thinking and feeling, the spiritual side of man's nature. Volition, as well as action, is accounted for in the operations of moral law:

> He began to wonder if life had not all been a chance with him. Nothing, not even the success of his book, in the light he now looked at it in, was the result of reasoned cause. That success had happened; it had not followed; and he didn't deserve any praise for what had merely happened. If this apparent fatality were confined to the economic world alone, he would have been willing to censure civilization, and take his chance dumbly, blindly, with the rest. He had not found it so. On the contrary, he had found the same caprice, the same rule of mere casualty, in the world which we suppose to be ordered by law--the world of thinking, the world of feeling. Who knew why or how this or that thought came, this or that feeling? Then, in that world where we lived in the spirit, was wrong always punished, was right always rewarded? We must own that we often saw the good unhappy, and the wicked enjoying themselves. This was not just; yet somehow we felt, we knew, that justice ruled the universe. Nothing, then, that seemed chance was really chance. It was the operation of a law so large that we caught a glimpse of its vast orbit once or twice in a lifetime. It was Providence.[4]

Howells' works, especially after 1890, seem to suggest that part of the basis for confusion in perceiving the

[4]W. D. Howells, The World of Chance (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), pp. 374-375.

presence of moral law lies in the fact that although it is our actions that we are responsible for, and our actions which transpose the causes into consequences, we are not always able to see a direct relationship between actions on one hand and the causes and effects on the other. Or rather, during our actions we envision such direct specific results that, when they do not occur in that manner, we then question that such actions had any ultimate logical effect anywhere. This again is because we are unable to see at once the total scheme of things. Perhaps the following dialogue from The Vacation of the Kelwyns suggests such an explanation:

> "Life is not very logical, Friend Kelwyn."
> "No, or else its logic is in the consequences, not in the actions. Of course, consequences flow from causes, but the actions that relate the consequences to the causes often seem to be of a quality quite different from either."
> "Yes; but it is in them that our individual responsibility lies. We have nothing to do with causes or consequences. They seem to belong to God."[5]

But if we are not always able to see the progression of cause and effect in the moral world, it is nevertheless

[5]W. D. Howells, The Vacation of the Kelwyns (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920), p. 112.

always there. In some manner every action develops into a consequence of like moral quality. Evil begets evil. Good begets good. Such an observation can be found in Indian Summer: "Colville followed as he could, slowly and with a heavy heart. A good thing develops itself in infinite and unexpected shapes of good; a bad thing into manifold and astounding evils."[6] An elaboration on this same point is provided by one of the more reliable witnesses in the same work:

> "Ah, there is something extremely interesting in all that," said the old minister thoughtfully. "The situation used to be figured under the old idea of a compact with the devil. The debtor was always on the point of escaping, as you say, but I recollect no instance in which he did not pay at last. The myth must have arisen from man's recognition of the inexorable sequence of cause from effect, in the moral world, which even repentance cannot avert. Goethe tries to imagine an atonement for Faust's trespass against one human soul in his benefactions to the race at large; but it is a very cloudy business."[7]

As has been indicated, this is also true for matters less tangible than actions. Certain emotional attitudes produce similar emotional climates and experiences--either for

[6] Indian Summer, p. 283.

[7] Ibid., p. 299. Mr. Waters is the speaker.

one's self or for somebody else. It is possible that Howells was quite imaginatively involved in the following speculation by one of the characters of A Modern Instance: "'But somehow the effects follow their causes. In some sort they chose misery for themselves,--we make our own hell in this life and the next,--or it was chosen for them by undisciplined wills that they inherited. In the long run their fate must be a just one.'"[8]

Apparently the operations of the moral principle are so complex that we experience effects caused, not only by our own actions and temperaments, but also by the actions and temperaments of others. In this sense the life of every human being is inevitably related to the life of every other human being. There is even a suggestion that this relationship may go beyond that of living with the consequences of another person's actions. It may be that the cycle is completed in the sense that in suffering the disadvantages of another's action one helps to atone for him--and in accepting the advantages of another's action one may help to convert the world into something better. Certainly such suggestions are at least

[8] A Modern Instance, p. 473. The speaker is Mr. Atherton.

speculated more than once in Howells' fiction. A discussion of the question of our inevitable relationship with others can be found in The Shadow of a Dream:

> "I shall begin to believe that there is such a thing as Fate, in that old Greek sense; something that punishes you for your sorrows and for the errors of others."
>
> "There is certainly something that does that," I said, "whether we call it Fate or not. We suffer every day for our sorrows, and for the sins of men we never saw or even heard of. There's solidarity in that direction, anyway."
>
> "Yes, and why can't we feel it in the other direction? Why can't we feel that we're helped, as well as hurt by those unknown people? Why aren't we rewarded for our happiness?"
>
> "It's all a mystery; and I don't know but we are rewarded for our happiness, quite as much as we're punished for our misery. Some utterly forgotten ancestral dyspeptic rises from the dust now and then, and smites me with his prehistoric indigestion. Well, perhaps it's some other forgotten ancestor, whose motions were all hale and joyous, that makes me get up now and then impersonally gay and happy, and go through the day as if I had just come into a blessed immortality."[9]

Later in the same work there is further speculation concerning the extent to which our suffering has a purpose. It is suggested that although there may not be any specific wrong to atone for, there be some long range good accomplished:

[9] The Shadow of a Dream, pp. 148-149. Discussion by the Marches.

> But this again seems abominably unfair: that they should suffer so for no wrong; unless, indeed, all suffering is to some end unknown to the sufferer or the witnesses, and no anguish is wasted, as that friend of Nevil's believed. We must come to some such conclusion, or else we must go back to a cruder theory, and say that they were all three destined to undergo what they underwent, and that what happened to them was not retribution, not penalty in any wise, since no wrong had been done, but simply fate.[10]

And in The Son of Royal Langbrith it is speculated that one purpose of suffering might be to help atone for others. It is further suggested that in witnessing the suffering of others one may benefit to the extent of being wiser in leading one's own life.

> "It may be the complicity of all mortal being is such that the pain he inflicted was endured to his behoof, and that it has helped him atone for his sins as an acceptable offering in the sort of vicarious atonement which has always been in the world."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "But Hope and James Langbrith are not unhappy. They are radiantly happy, and more wisely happy for tasting the sorrow which has not passed down to their generation."[11]

In embracing the theory that the good and evil we

[10]Ibid., p. 226. Basil March speaking as narrator.

[11]W. D. Howells, The Son of Royal Langbrith (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904), p. 369. The rector is speaking at the conclusion of the work.

do has continuing effects as it relates to other events in the universe, Howells is apparently further concerned with the question of which quality is ultimately stronger. His observations seem to indicate that at first glance we can easily form the impression that the effects of evil are stronger and longer lasting. Such an observation can be found in "His Apparition":

> . . . . evil, like good, does not cease till it has fulfilled itself in every possible consequence. It seems even more active and persistent. Good seems to satisfy itself sometimes in the direct effect, but evil winds sinuously in and out, and reaches round and over and under its wretched author, and strikes him in every tender and fatal place, with an ingenuity in finding the places out that seem truly of hell.[12]

However, the reason for this impression lies in the fact that evil normally has a more active and dramatic quality than good. This is the reasoning of "A Circle in the Water":

> What was it, I mused, that made an evil deed so much more memorable than a good one? Why should a crime have so much longer lodgement in our minds, and be of consequences so much more lasting than the sort of action which is opposite of a crime, but has no precise name with us? Was it because the want of positive quality which left it nameless,

[12]"His Apparition," Questionable Shapes, p. 50.

> characterized its effects with a kind of essential debility? Was evil then a greater force than good in the moral world?[13]

In the final analysis Howells seems to feel that good will overcome evil. The two qualities may have the same initial strength. But the decisive distinction is in the manner in which they perpetuate themselves. Evil is a degenerative quality and will therefore eventually burn itself out. Good is a regenerative quality and therefore has infinite potential. In the form of love, good can even arrest the consequences of evil. Thus we find statements like the following from "Zola's Naturalism": 'There is in the course of history something more than the suggestion that evil dies of the mortal sting which it inflicts, and that it defeats those who employ it, in accomplishing itself . . . ."[14] And in "A Circle in the Water" we find the following concluding section to a discussion of this whole problem:

[13]W. D. Howells, "A Circle in the Water," A Pair of Patient Lovers (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), p. 287.

[14]"Zola's Naturalism," Criticism and Fiction, p. 157.

> So far now as human vision can perceive, the trouble he made, the evil he did, is really at an end. Love, which can alone arrest the consequences of wrong, had ended it, and in certain luminous moments it seemed to us that we had glimpsed, in our witness of this experience, an infinite compassion encompassing our whole being like a sea, where every trouble of our sins and sorrows must cease at last like a circle in the water.[15]

Howells apparently not only believes that good will infinitely prevail, but also that human nature basically is good. His view of human nature generally seems very close to that of Basil March in A Hazard of New Fortunes, "' . . . we school ourselves to despise human nature. But God did not make us despicable . . . .'"[16] This view of human nature is very similar to that expressed in A Traveler from Altruria by Mr. Homos, who bases his statement on what he has observed in the utopian state:

> " . . . we have found out that it is not human nature to hoard and grudge, but that when the fear, and even the imagination, of want is taken away, it is human nature to give and to help generously. We used to say, 'A man will lie, or a man will cheat in his own interests; that is human nature,' but that is no longer human nature with us, perhaps because no man has any interest

[15]"A Circle in the Water," A Pair of Patient Lovers, p. 368.

[16]A Hazard of New Fortunes, p. 473.

> to serve; he has only the interests of others to serve, while others serve his."[17]

And perhaps it can be argued that this assumption that human nature is basically good is at the very core of Howells' political theories. The founding fathers of the American Constitution set up devices to restrict the power of government, and even to build in conflict, because they believed that power would tend to corrupt government officials and therefore constitute a danger to the people. This involves the assumption that human nature is essentially evil, or at least that if it is unrestricted there is a real danger that it will then operate in terms of self-interest rather than common interest. Howells is able to visualize a highly socialistic system with government ownership and control of all properties and functions,[18] without any apparent fear that government officials would then use this power against the people they were chosen to serve. His particular brand of socialism apparently imposes no significant controls or limitations on the powers of government officials, except the ultimate

[17] A Traveler from Altruria, p. 196.

[18] Ibid. See especially pp. 180-181.

control through the ballot box. This presupposes the assumption that human nature is essentially good. It can be argued, then, that one aspect of Howells' trust in a projected socialised system is grounded in his own very personal views about the relative powers of good and evil from which he developed a theory of the essential goodness of human nature. Although a belief in the natural goodness of man does not necessarily result in a theory such as the one Howells envisioned, it does remove a major obstacle to such a theory. Such an assumption eliminates the need for establishing conflicting powers because it precludes the possibility that power in itself will corrupt. An assumption that human nature is essentially evil might more logically presuppose the need for conflict, for it would be assumed that self-interest, growing out of reasonable individual need would become corrupted into selfishness, which conflicts with general need. There would, therefore, be no natural balance between individual need and general need. Such a balance is provided only by conflict. But for Howells, it is the conflict itself which causes

selfishness. Fear of defeat forces one to regard private need ahead of public need. Remove the fear and there is no longer any reason to doubt man's goodness. Thus there is no longer any reason to fear centralized power. In the political sense, therefore, Howells' system of socialism probably appealed to him as consistent with his personal observations of human nature.

Some personal basis can also be found for the economic aspects of Howells' socialism. His theories are to some extent based on his memories of his own experiences, particularly those of childhood. In fact, to a certain extent he returned to these memories for the specific structural basis of his Altrurian economic system. In A Traveler from Altruria he reports that under the Altrurian system of common ownership, the whole community is a "family, where all are economically equal, and no one can want while any other has to give . . . ."[19] In A Boy's Town he reports a similar result of an experiment in community ownership: "But the Hydraulic, I believe, was a town work, and everybody felt himself an owner in it, and hoped to share in the

[19]Ibid., p. 199.

prosperity which it should bring to all. It made the people so far one family, as every public work which they own in common always does; it made them brothers and equals, as private property never does."[20] In My Literary Passions he recalls the simple, but equal, economic conditions of his boyhood, which were a happy contrast to the unequal conditions he observed in adulthood: " . . . but nobody was rich there or then; we lived in the simple abundance of that time and place, and we did not know that we were poor. As yet the unequal modern conditions were undreamed of (who indeed could have dreamed of them forty or fifty years ago?) in the little Southern Ohio town where nearly the whole of my most happy boyhood was passed."[21] This is similar to the recollection reported in A Boy's Town: "I have tried to give some notion of the general distribution of comfort which was never riches in the Boy's Town; but I am afraid that I could not paint the simplicity of things there truly without being misunderstood in these days of

[20] A Boy's Town, p. 50.

[21] My Literary Passions, pp. 8-9.

great splendor and great squalor."[22] And perhaps even a more direct biographical basis for Howells' economic theories can be established by analyzing his very self-conscious report in Literary Friends and Acquaintance of how he could not possibly have suffered so few penalties at the beginning of his literary career, had he not lived in a community such as Cambridge where economic inequities counted so little. He even indicates that it was the best possible system, short of completely socialized conditions:

> . . . I do not believe that since the capitalistic era began there was ever a community in which money counted for less. . . .
>
> The reader will imagine how acceptable this circumstance was to a young literary man beginning life with a fully mortgaged house and a salary of untried elasticity. . . . To my mind, the structure of society was almost ideal, and until we have a perfectly socialized condition of things I do not believe we shall ever have a more perfect society.[23]

If his memories are happy to the extent that there was economic equity, they are also unhappy to the extent that there was economic inequity. In Years of My Youth he

[22] A Boy's Town, p. 78.

[23] Literary Friends and Acquaintance, pp. 180-181.

recalls the emotional suffering associated with the economic adversity of his parents.[24] He recalls the physical pain of overworking during childhood--an effort made necessary in part to combat the hopeless burden of his parents' debt. He even states that to some extent it was this memory which caused his disenchantment with American economic conditions:

> Until eleven o'clock I helped put the telegraphic despatches (then a new and proud thing with us) into type, and between four and five o'clock in the morning I was up and carrying papers to our subscribers. The stress of my father's affairs must have been very sore for him to allow this, and I dare say it did not last long, but while it lasted it was suffering which must make me forever tender of those who overwork, especially the children who overwork. The suffering was such that when my brother, who had not gone to bed till much later, woke me after my five or six hours' sleep, I do not now know how I got myself together for going to the printing-office for the papers and making my rounds in the keen morning air. . . . my brother knew of the heavy trouble hanging over us and I was aware of the hopeless burden of debt which our father was staggering under and my mother was carrying on her heart; and when I think of it, and of the wide-spread, never-ending struggle for life which it was and is the type of, I cannot but abhor the economic conditions which we still suppose an essential of civilization.[25]

[24]Years of My Youth, p. 40.

[25]Ibid., p. 41.

This report is suggestive of a similar observation in "Worries of a Winter Walk," in which he describes another child who is overworked because of difficult economic conditions. The very fact that such children work harder and better than those who succeed is an ironic discrepancy which to Howells more than justifies their discontent with unequal conditions:

> The pail--which was half her height and twice her bulk--was filled to overflowing with small pieces of coal and coke, and if it had not been for this I might have taken her for a child of the better classes, she was so comfortably clad. But in that case she would have had to be fifteen or sixteen years old, in order to be doing so efficiently and responsibly the work which, as the child of the worse classes, she was actually doing at five or six. We must, indeed, allow that the early self-helpfulness of such children is very remarkable, and all the more so because they grow up into men and women so stupid that, according to the theories of all polite economists, they have to have their discontent with their conditions put into their heads by malevolent agitators.[26]

Howells was sensitive also to the insecurity and lack of freedom in depending upon the power of another for work. He focuses upon such a problem in A Hazard of New Fortunes:

[26]"Worries of a Winter Walk," Literature and Life, p. 37.

"He realized, as every hireling must, no matter how skilfully or gracefully the tie is contrived for his wearing, that he belongs to another, whose will is law."[27] It is quite possible that this observation stemmed from memories of his own similar experience:

> . . . there were tremors of insecurity in my position, such as came from the bookkeeper's difficulty in sometimes finding the money for my weekly wage, which might well have alarmed me for the continued working of the economic machine. Like every man who depends upon the will or power of another man to give him work, I served a master, and though I served the kindest master in the world, I could not help sharing his risks. It appeared that our newspaper had not been re-established upon a foundation so firm but that it needed new capital to prop it, after something over a year, and then a business change took place which left me out.[28]

Howells finally became completely disenchanted with the American competitive civilization. He saw the whole economic structure as a game of chance where one is constantly threatened with insecurity. In a private letter of 1888, he wrote, " . . . it seems to me that our competitive civilization is a state of warfare and a game

[27] A Hazard of New Fortunes, pp. 391-392.

[28] Years of My Youth, p. 198.

of chance, in which each man fights, and bets against fearful odds."[29] It is probable, therefore, that he felt closely identified with his fictional characters who held the same opinion. Such an observation was made by Mr. Homos in Letters of an Altrurian Traveller: "In fact their whole business world is a world of chance, where nothing happens according to law, but follows a loose order of accident, which any other order of accident may change."[30] A similar stance is taken by Basil March in A Hazard of New Fortunes: "'All that was distinctly the chance of life and death. That belonged to God; and no doubt it was law, though it seems chance. But what I object to is this economic chance-world in which we live, and which we men seem to have created.'"[31] Howells' concern regarding the extent of chance in the world took two forms. As indicated earlier his solution concerning the moral and emotional chances was to justify

[29]To Edward Everett Hale, Aug. 30, 1888, in Life in Letters, I, 416.

[30]W. D. Howells, Letters of an Altrurian Traveller (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Fascimiles and Reprints, 1961), p. 15.

[31]A Hazard of New Fortunes, pp. 485-486.

them as being part of the total scheme of the universe. These are risks we have to assume. The physical chances, however, particularly the economic risks, seemed to him a result of a defect in man-made institutions--not to be justified, but changed. Ideally, the change would completely eliminate economic chance. Such is the system of Altruria: "'We have totally eliminated chance from our economic life.'"[32]

As a part of his own experience Howells visited a community which did succeed in almost totally eliminating economic risk--that of the Shakers.[33] A comparison between the Shaker community and the Altrurian community is revealing. They are alike in that they attempt to eliminate economic, social, and political risk--matters having to do with survival. But they were drastically opposite concerning personal, emotional, and creative risk--matters having to do with self-fulfillment.[34] It is almost as if Howells

[32]A Traveler from Altruria, p. 203.

[33]This fact is reported by Clara Marburg and Rudolf Kirk, William Dean Howells (Chicago: American Book Company, 1950), pp. c-ci.

[34]See especially Idyls in Drab and The Undiscovered Country.

borrows the Shakers' concepts concerning the former in order to insure against their concepts of the latter. In freeing the individual from the problem of overwork, he feels that he frees him for the chance to concentrate more on creative work. In freeing him from the need of economic warfare, he feels that he frees him for the opportunity of personal service to humanity.

It was suggested in earlier chapters that an important aspect of Howells' value system was his insistence upon one's moral obligation to serve the needs of others. It should be suggested here that in order to give proper scope to this value, Howells felt it was necessary to develop an economic system which was such that there would be no conflict between the private needs of survival and this public obligation of Christian service. In his fiction we find statements of this conflict as seen in the capitalistic America of Howells' adulthood. In Letters of an Altrurian Traveller it is suggested, " . . . in conditions which oblige every man to look out for himself, a man cannot be a Christian without remorse . . . ."[35]

[35]Letters of an Altrurian Traveller, p. 88.

A similar observation can be found in A Hazard of New Fortunes: "'We don't moil and toil to ourselves alone; the palace or the poor-house is not merely for ourselves, but for our children, whom we've brought up in the superstition that having and shining is the chief good. We dare not teach them otherwise, for fear they may falter in the fight when it comes their turn, and the children of others will crowd them out of the palace into the poorhouse.'"[36] The chief problem with the economic struggle is that it encourages the worship of money--which in turn undermines the whole moral value system. "Luxury has undermined everything,"[37] he wrote in a private letter. And perhaps the most effective statement of this position is in The Flight of Pony Baker, a novelette for children in which is related an incident where Pony's cousin, Frank, is charged with the care of his brother, and then also of a great deal of money. During a time of potential crisis, Frank shows great courage in protecting the money--but forgets about his brother. Later, his father said: "'The

[36]A Hazard of New Fortunes, p. 487. Spoken by Basil March.

[37]To William Cooper Howells, April 6, 1873, in Life in Letters, I, 178.

trouble with money is, that people who have a great deal of it seem to be more anxious about it than they are about their brothers . . . .'"[38]

Much of Howells' concern about the economic system, then, can be traced to his interest in promoting a system that would encourage human brotherhood. It is understandable that he would be attracted to any program which he felt would do this. It can be concluded, therefore, that even before he read the political and economic tracts which lent form to his own theories, he had an emotional attraction to the system of life described in the Altrurian romances.

It has been suggested that there is a biographical or temperamental basis for Howells' economic theories. Perhaps it should even be suggested that Howells himself may have recognized that his theories of economic socialism were in part a result of subjective forces. In a private letter, written in 1900, he referred to his own "internal socialism"[39]--perhaps a very applicable phrase in regard

[38]W. D. Howells, The Flight of Pony Baker (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1902), p. 191.

[39]To Charles Dudley Warner, Feb. 1, 1900, in Life in Letters, II, 125.

to the relationship between temperament and theory.

CHAPTER SIX

SOCIAL THEORY

Yes, I suppose it is well to make some sort of exclusion,
Well to put up the bars, under whatever pretence;
Only be careful, be very careful, lest in the confusion
You should shut yourself on the wrong side of the fence.[1]

[1]"Good Society," Stops of Various Quills, n.p.

It was Howells' conviction that to the extent that a society allowed pronounced economic inequities, there would be corresponding social inequities. There would therefore be a class system, which would contradict the very assumption upon which a democratic system is based--that of equality of all individuals. He felt that this trend was taking place in America, particularly in the Eastern cities. Perhaps his most extreme expression of this position is articulated by the Altrurian, Mr. Homos, a character created to criticize the American conditions at their worst:

> The Americans still imagine that they have liberty, but as for the equality which we supposed the aim of their democracy, nobody any longer even pretends that it is, or that it can be. With the rich there is a cynical contempt of it; with the poor a cynical despair of it. The division into classes here is made as sharply as in any country of Europe, and the lines are passed only by the gain or the loss of money. I say only, but of course there are exceptions. . . . but what I say holds good of the vast majority of cases. Every tendency of economic social life is a tendency to greater and greater difference between the classes; and in New York, which is the most typical of the American cities, the tendency is swifter and stronger than in other places.[2]

[2]Letters of an Altrurian Traveller, p. 19.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Altrurian community there is a system which eliminates not only economic but social injustice: " . . . every one was secured against want by the common provision, and against the degrading and depraving inequality which comes from want."[3] To a great extent this ideal system is founded on Howells' own memories of the economic and social system he knew in Ohio. In Years of My Youth he recalls a system of social equality where manners were free and simple. It should be noted, however, that even then there were faint beginnings of the Eastern trend toward more crystalized social systems:

> We had already begun to be Ohioans, with an accent of our own, and I suppose our manners were simpler and freer than those of the East, but the American manners were then everywhere simple and free, and are so yet, I believe, among ninety-nine hundred-thousandths of our ninety-nine millions. It seems to me now that manners in Columbus were very good then among the young people. No one can say what change the over-muchness of subsequent money may have made in them, but one likes to think the change, if any, is not for the better. There seems to have been greater pecuniary equality then than there is now; there was an evener sky-line, with scarcely a sky-scraping millionaire breaking it anywhere. Within what was recognized as society

[3] Through the Eye of the Needle, p. 90.

> there was as much social as pecuniary equality; apparently one met the same people everywhere on that easily ascertained level above the people who worked for their living with their hands.[4]

In Through the Eye of the Needle we find again this emphasis upon simplicity of manners. It is indicated that the masses of American people observe the same simple social habits practiced in Altruria. These wholesome forms of entertaining constitute a favorable contrast to the more rigid and highly developed forms of elite society:

> I am speaking now of the hospitality of society people, who number, after all, but a few thousands out of the many millions of American people. These millions are so far from being in society, even when they are very comfortable, and on the way to great prosperity, if they are not already greatly prosperous, that if they were suddenly confronted with the best society of the great Eastern cities they would find it almost as strange as so many Altrurians. A great part of them have

[4]Years of My Youth, p. 173. He does indicate, however, that throughout the country there was always social discrimination against manual laborers--discrimination which Howells attributes to the anti-democratic social habits of competitive systems: "These were excluded, as they always have been excluded from society in all times and places; so that if I had still been a compositor at the printer's case I could not have been received at any of the houses that welcomed me as a journalist, though that did not occur to me then and only just now occurs to me, as something strange and sad; something that forever belies our democracy, but

> no conception of entertaining except upon an Altrurian scale of simplicity, and they know nothing and care less for the forms that society people value themselves upon. When they begin, in the ascent of the social scale, to adopt forms, it is still to wear them lightly and with an individual freedom and indifference; it is long before anxiety concerning social law renders them vulgar.[5]

This similarity between Altruria and non-urban America is further suggested in a report concerning Mrs. Gray's reactions to the Altrurian society, as contrasted with the New York society. "The best she can say of it is that it is like the world of her girlhood; and she has gone back to the simple life here from the artificial life in New York, with the joy of a child."[6]

It is perhaps significant that in Altruria the simple, inclusive social ideal is facilitated by the "distribution into small communities."[7] There are easy social festivities which all can share, and Altrurians

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is so fast and deep-rooted in the conditions which our plutocracy has kept from our ancestral monarchies and oligarchies and must keep as long as men live upon one another in the law of competition."

[5]*Through the Eye of the Needle*, pp. 73-74.

[6]Ibid., p. 131.

[7]*A Traveler from Altruria*, p. 205.

"like to meet suddenly, or on the spur of the moment, out of doors, if possible, and arrange a picnic, or a dance, or a play; and let people come and go without ceremony."[8] This is suggestive of the community social life which Howells once knew, revolted from, and then came to value in retrospect:

> There had been ranging of the woods in autumn for chestnuts and in the spring for wintergreen; there had been the sleigh-rides to the other villages and the neighboring farms where there was young life waiting to welcome us through the drifting snows; there had been the dances at the taverns and the parties at the girls' houses with the games and the frolics, and the going home each with the chosen one at midnight and the long lingering at the gate; there had been the moonlight walks; there had been the debating societies and the spelling matches . . . . But these things had passed, and with a certain disappointment suffered and yet prized there had come the sense of spent witchery and a spell outworn, and I chose to revolt from it all and to pine for a wider world and prouder pleasures. Distance in time and space afterward duly set the village I had wearied of in a truer and kinder light, and I came to value it as the potential stuff of such fiction as has never yet been written, and now never will be by me. I came to see that it abounded in characteristics and interests which differenced it from any other village, and I still think the companionship . . . such as would make into the setting for as strange a story as we could ask of reality . . . .[9]

[8]Ibid.

[9]Years of My Youth, pp. 104-105.

It is a temptation to conclude that, at least subconsciously, such early autobiographical experiences as reported above really were written into fiction when Howells wrote in the Altrurian romances indeed "as strange a story as we could ask of reality." He re-created the society which lacked the artificiality and impersonality which he had later found typical of Eastern urban centers. And perhaps it was his own experiences which provided him the data for describing in fiction the dramatic contrast one feels when he leaves the village environment for the urban environment. The following analysis from A Modern Instance is typical:

> He suffered from the loss of identity which is a common affliction with country people coming to town. The feeling that they are of no special interest to any of the thousands they meet bewilders and harasses them; after the searching neighborhood of village life, the fact that nobody would meddle in their most intimate affairs if they could, is a vague distress. The Squire not only experienced this, but, after reigning so long as the censor of morals and religion in Equity, it was a deprivation for him to pass a whole week without saying a bitter thing to any one. He was tired of the civilities that smoothed him down on every side.[10]

[10] A Modern Instance, pp. 273-274.

If Howells was sensitive to the cultural adjustments for one moving from village to city or from West to East, he was equally aware of the corresponding adjustments for one moving in the opposite direction. Regarding his own experience in touring the West after having been accustomed to the Eastern culture he said, in a letter written in 1899, "People are freer from West to East."[11] He was sensitive to the impersonality of the urbanized culture, but he was also sensitive to the narrowness of the village culture. He observed that people who are unchallenged by a broad base of intellectual and cultural stimuli are inclined to become ingrown and self-satisfied in their interests. They not only cease to develop but cease to recognize the need for development. Their attitudes are generous, but have the conceit of self-righteousness. Their sympathies are well meaning, but have the crudity resulting from poorly developed sensitivities. Their intellects are active, but are dulled by the repetition of ingrown activities. Their value system is humanitarian, but unsparingly

[11]To Mrs. W. D. Howells, Nov. 19, 1899, in Life in Letters, II, 116.

personal. Their politics are democratic, yet uncommonly prejudiced. Thus we find explanations like the following from Annie Kilburn:

> They stayed and talked a long time after rising, with the same note of unsparing personality in their talk. Where there are few public interests and few events, as in such places, there can be no small-talk, nothing of the careless touch-and-go of larger societies. Every one knows all the others, and knows the worst of them. People are not unkind; they are mutually and freely helpful; but they have only themselves to occupy their minds.[12]

Another passage from the same novel deals with the bluntness typically developed by the village dweller who has little opportunity to develop refined sensibilities and is accustomed to matter-of-fact dealing with even the deepest life experiences:

> "I don't see why he don't have the remains brought to Hatboro', anyway."
>
> They debated this point at some length, and they seemed to forget Annie. She listened with more interest than her concern in the last resting-place of the minister's dead wife really inspired. These old friends of hers seemed to have lost the sensitiveness of their girlhood without having gained tenderness in its place. They treated the affair with a nakedness that shocked her. In the country and

[12]Annie Kilburn, p. 32.

> In small towns people come face to face with life, especially women. It means marrying, child-bearing, household cares and burdens, neighborhood gossip, sickness, death, burial, and whether the corpse appeared natural. But ever so much kindness goes with their illusion; they are blunted but not embittered.[13]

A passage from still another work, April Hopes, indicates tendencies of self-satisfaction developed by people who lead isolated lives: " . . . they come to think that they are the only people who have their virtues; they exaggerate these, and they conceive a kindness even for the qualities which are not their virtues."[14] Another passage from the same novel contains a justification of worldly people--as opposed to those from a limited environment: "'Some of the best people I've ever known were what were called worldly people. They are apt to be sincere, and they have none of the spiritual pride, the conceit of self-righteousness, which often comes to people who are shut up by conscience or circumstance to the study of their own motives and actions.'"[15]

[13]Ibid., p. 29.

[14]April Hopes, p. 406.

[15]Ibid., p. 426.

We find, then, that for Howells there is almost a dualistic view of the value of the respective social systems. He valued the Western village culture of his childhood for its close sense of neighborhood, its simple manners, and its tradition of near social equality. As he contrasted the memory of this with the social system of the Eastern urban centers, he was shocked by the relative impersonality, artificiality, and social exclusiveness--though he may have been enchanted by the social gaieties. But as he compared again, such as during tours of the West, after having become accustomed to the intellectual sophistication and freedom of the East, he became conscious of the narrowness of the more limited communities. It was probably the cultural centers such as Cambridge and Boston which came closest to his ideal and represented, in a sense, a mergence of the two cultures. An earlier chapter suggested that his experience in Cambridge afforded direct evidence of the advantages of a democratic system for the development of the artist. It can also be suggested that his experience in Boston convinced him that the "sense of neighborhood" to be found in self-satisfied cultural centers will operate upon the artist in such a way that it deepens his sense

of responsibility to society: " . . . I cannot think that the sense of neighborhood is such a bad thing for the artist in any sort. It involves the sense of responsibility, which cannot be too constant or too keen. If it narrows, it deepens; and this may be the secret of Boston."[16] This constant comparison of somewhat opposing cultures suggests an observation Howells once made in an article on Mark Twain. He refers to the dramatic contrast between America's Western world of natural circumstances and her Eastern world of highly developed institutions. And he suggests that when a Western man is confronted with the value system of the East, he is then forced to reappraise his own value system:

> . . . the Westerner . . . is not more thoroughly the creature of circumstances, of conditions, but far more dramatically their creature, than any prior man. He found himself placed in them and under them, so near to a world in which the natural and primitive was obsolete, that while he could not escape them, neither could he help challenging them. The inventions, the appliances, the improvements of the modern world invaded the hoary eld of his rivers and forests and prairies, and while he was still a pioneer, a hunter, a trapper, he found himself confronted with the

[16] Literary Friends and Acquaintance, p. 70.

> financier, the scholar, the gentleman. They seemed to him, with the world they represented, at first very droll, and he laughed. Then they set him thinking, and as he never was afraid of anything, he thought over the whole field, and demanded explanations of all his prepossessions, of equality, of humanity, of representative government and revealed religion. When they had not their answers ready, without accepting the conventions of the modern world as solutions or in any manner final, he laughed again, not mockingly, but patiently, compassionately. Such, or somewhat like this was the genesis and evolution of Mark Twain.[17]

It might well be suggested that somewhat like this was the genesis and evolution of William Dean Howells. He became forced to reappraise both systems. And perhaps a strategic factor in such a reappraisal was Howells' concern for the position of the artist in society. As an artist he felt the need for close contact with humanity. As an artist he felt the obligation to serve all humanity. As an artist he felt the obligation to regard all individuals as equal. But as an artist he recognized the need for a highly developed cultural base which would provide a standard of refinement upon which to develop and measure

[17]"Mark Twain, an Inquiry," Criticism and Fiction, p. 218. A treatment of more specialized aspects of Howells' social theory may be found in The Vacation of the Kelwyns.

artistic accomplishment. This involves a potential conflict, for there is an assumption of equality on the one hand and inequality on the other hand. There is equality of human dignity but inequality of human accomplishment. The value of one man may be exactly equal to that of another man, but the value of his opinion will be measured according to a stratified cultural standard that has developed through the generations. In regard to natural worth there are absolute standards. In regard to accomplished worth there are relative standards. Apparently Howells' solution was to envision the Altrurian system, which he felt tended as much as possible to preserve the advantages of both by establishing small neighborhoods with simple social festivities open to all, but with an uncommonly broad cultural base. The possibilities for intellectual development and artistic refinement are exceptionally good in Altruria. There are great libraries, there are community discussions, there is a wide range of community interests, and there is a value system encouraging everyone to do his work so well that it has the artistic value of a craft or an art. But, perhaps most important, to the extent that the value system which

recognized the essential equality of men tends to conflict with the value system which recognizes the essential inequality of men's artistic achievements, there is an attempt to emphasize the former over the latter. Social ambition is killed out[18] and artistic tastes are made "approaches, not barriers" to common social activity.[19] Altrurians "meet constantly to argue and dispute on questions of aesthetics and metaphysics."[20] In fact, for Howells it is an artist's function to use his talent in such a way as to unite rather than distinguish humanity. Ultimately, then, the moral value of humanitarianism takes precedence over the cultural value of refinement of taste. Perhaps this is no better stated than in "The Romantic Imagination" in a passage defending the American or non-European environment as suitable for the development of the artist.

> Such beauty and such grandeur as we have is common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself

[18] A Traveler from Altruria, p. 206.

[19] Ibid., p. 205.

[20] Ibid., p. 195.

> to the disadvantage of anything else. It seems to me that these conditions invite the artist to the study and the appreciation of the common, and to the portrayal in every art of those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity, if he would thrive in our new order of things.[21]

It can be argued, then, that much of Howells' concern for the position of the artist in an equalitarian order can be traced to his own interest in solving the dilemma between the artist's need to develop his professional values through reference to a stratified cultural standard and his obligation to develop his personal values through reference to an equalitarian moral standard. This conflict was brought into sharper focus for him because he was in a position to see the dramatic contrast between the moral and cultural values of the East and the West. And although he borrowed certain ingredients of independence, refinement, and opportunity for professional development from the culture of the East, he insisted upon retaining the equalitarian moral standards of the West--standards which, as we have seen, had continued to be a

[21]"Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, pp. 66-67.

necessary part of his own value system for a number of highly personal reasons.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HISTRIONIC TEMPERAMENT

How often, when I wake from sleep at night,
I search my consciousness to find the ill
That has lurked formlessly within it, still
Haunting me with a shadowy affright;
And try to seize it and to know aright
Its vague proportions, and my frantic will
Runs this way and runs that way, with a thrill
Of horror, to all things that ban or blight!
Then, when I find all well, it is as though
The moment were some reef where I had crept
From the wide waste of danger and of death,
And for a little I might draw my breath
Before the flood came up again, and swept
Over it, and gulfed me in its deeps below.[1]

[1]"In the Dark," Stops of Various Quills, n. p.

In Howells' fiction we find frequent mention of a problem which he attributes to the imaginative temperament. He refers to the aesthetic disposition, the histrionic nature, the morbid conscience, the suggestible intellect--in each case to indicate a mental and emotional make-up which is peculiarly susceptible to an overly serious introspective habit of fancying things beyond their reality. He is concerned about the effects upon the personality resulting from this intense sensitivity, particularly if it takes the form of moral sensitivity. He feels that the inevitable result of an over-active imagination concerning moral obligation is a tendency toward exaggeration of personal guilt. One becomes the prey of morbid self-suggestions and accusing self-questions. He not only exaggerates the actual, but he so effectively envisions the potential or possible that he confuses the one with the other. That which he fancies takes on such a semblance of reality that it affects the temperament as if it were reality. If such an effect is a sense of guilt, this sense of guilt is mistaken imaginatively for actual guilt--or rather in noticing that the

emotional effects of this sense of guilt are very real, one forgets that the cause was not real. Therefore, one blames himself for his reactions rather than for his actions. And we find that in Howells' fiction there are repeated references indicating that such a personality problem is due in part to an overly-active imagination. Such an observation is made in "A Difficult Case":

> Like all imaginative people, he was at times the prey of morbid self-suggestions, whose nature can scarcely be stated without excess. The more monstrous the thing appeared to his mind and conscience, the more fascinating it became. Once the mere horror of such a conception as catching a comely parishoner /sic/ about the waist and kissing her, when she had come to him with a case of conscience, had so confused him in her presence as to make him answer her wildly, not because he was really tempted to the wickedness, but because he realized so vividly the hideousness of the impossible temptation.[2]

A similar observation is made in Letters Home, an epistolary novel: " . . . he said he was the sort of person to increase the danger of any situation he found himself in by fancying things far beyond the reality; that he was capable of becoming anything he dreaded becoming; he had

[2]"A Difficult Case," A Pair of Patient Lovers, pp. 196-197.

a supersensitive conscience, and would sacrifice himself or anybody else to its aberrations."[3] In The World of Chance this same problem is attributed to the aesthetic temperament:

> But all the time he knew that he was feigning these things, and that there was no more truth in them than in the supposition which he indulged at other times that he was himself in love with Mrs. Denton, and always had been, and this was the reason why he could not care for Peace. It was the effect in both cases of the aesthetic temperament, which is as often the slave as the master of its reveries.[4]

Still another example of such reasoning can be found in March's advice to Nevil in The Shadow of a Dream: "'Hold on! Wait! This is monstrous!' I broke in upon him. 'It's atrocious. You're the victim of your own morbid introspection, of a kind of self-analysis that never ends in anything but self-conviction.'"[5] And again in the same work: "'You are only afraid that you are guilty; it amounts to that, and it amounts to nothing more . . . . I know that kind of infernal juggle of the morbid conscience; but I

[3]W. D. Howells, Letters Home (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903), p. 263.

[4]The World of Chance, p. 295.

[5]The Shadow of a Dream, p. 213.

thank Heaven I have my own conscience in such good training now that it accuses me of nothing that I haven't done: it finds it has quite enough to do in dealing with the facts; I don't supply it with any fancies!'"[6]

In light of these and other examples it is not surprising to find that Howells disapproves of any cultural influence which produces the intensely personalized conscience. To this extent he disapproves of Puritanism, for he feels that much of the soul-sickness and exaggerated moral intensity found in American individuals is due to the Puritan strains in the American cultural habits. The Puritanized conscience can be distinguished from the ecclesiasticized conscience by the fact that the conformity is to inward standards of personal morality rather than outward standards of social forms. Either influence can, in its extreme, have a very warping effect upon the personality. The Puritanized system offers a greater potential for moral growth because the individual takes more complete responsibility for judging his own actions and motives. However, it also provides greater potential for emotional illness

[6]Ibid., p. 220.

because such responsibility can seem enlarged beyond the person's capacity to deal with it. When Puritanism is in its most degenerate form, the moral growth ceases and the emotional illness increases--or rather the emotional habits remain after the reason for them is lost. Observations concerning the effects of the respective religious system can be found throughout Howells' works. An example is the following passage from An Imperative Duty: " . . . to each must be left the question of how far the Puritan civilization has carried the cult of the personal conscience into mere dutiolatry. The daughter of an elder faith would have simplified the affair, and perhaps shirked the responsibility proper to her, by going first with her secret to her confessor, and then being ruled by him."[7] Still another example can be found in "Puritanism in American Fiction." In this case he argues that a kind of strength may remain after the theology has disappeared:

> . . . while the belief of some New-Englanders approaches this theology the belief of most is now far from it; and yet its penetrating individualism so deeply influenced the New England character that Puritanism survives in the moral and mental make of the people almost in its early strength. Conduct and manner conform to a dead religious ideal; the

[7] An Imperative Duty, p. 173.

> wish to be sincere, the wish to be just, the wish to be righteous are before the wish to be kind, merciful, humble. A people are not a chosen people for half a dozen generations without acquiring a spiritual pride that remains with them long after they cease to believe themselves chosen. They are often stiffened in the neck and they are often hardened in the heart by it, to the point of making them angular and cold; but they are of an inveterate responsibility to a power higher than themselves, and they are strengthened for any fate.[8]

And in Heroines of Fiction Howells describes his understanding of the distinction between the Puritanized and ecclesiasticized conscience:

> In the Hardy lower-class heroines we see the primitive Englishwoman before she was touched by Puritanism, and in his middle and upper class heroines the same woman as she has grown into modern civilization unaffected by the tremendous force which has permeated and molded the nature of the American great-great-grandnieces of that original Englishwoman. I have often wondered what character untouched by Puritanism was like, and I have fancied that in the Hardy heroines I have seen; and if I cannot altogether approve of it, I can own its charm, as I can willingly acknowledge the ugliness and error and soul-sickness which Puritanism produced in building up our intensely personalized American conscience. If we take the case even of such a character as Sue Brodhead /sic/ in "Jude," with her hysterically exaggerated impulses toward what

[8]"Puritanism in American Fiction," Literature and Life, p. 281.

> her conscience bids her do, we have the nervous impressibility of the Puritanized woman, but we are made finely aware that it is the like effect of wholly different causes. It is the ecclesiasticized conscience which works in this English girl, not the personalized conscience which would drive a like American girl to the same frenetic extremes.[9]

Related to the analysis of Puritanism is Howells' appraisal of the Anglo-Saxon value system--a system which he sees as lacking proportion in that it tends to over-rate the assets of a serious nature and under-rate the assets of a lighter nature. In the following passage from Heroines of Fiction he argues that it is unfair to judge both in terms of what is natural only to the former:

> We judge one another so inadequately and unfairly in the actual world, however, that beings of the imaginary world must not expect better treatment. There as here, the light nature will be condemned for the deeds done in it as if they were done in a serious nature, and a serious nature will be honored for truth to itself as if it had overcome in this the weakness of a light nature. Especially among all peoples of Anglo-Saxon birth and breeding will the same inflexible measure of morality be applied, and the characterization of one who has done nobly will be thought greater than that of

[9]"Mr. Thomas Hardy's Heroines," Heroines of Fiction, II, 179-180.

one who has not done nobly.[10]

There is biographical evidence that Howells himself suffered from the very morbid conscientiousness which he warned against in his fiction. He reports that as a child he had an over-developed moral sensitivity, involving an unreasoned dread of guilt. The following report from A Boy's Town is typical:

> . . . this tale and others of a like vindictive virtuousness imbued him with such a desire to lead an upright life that he was rather a bother to his friends with his scruples. A girl at school mislaid a pencil which she thought she had lent him, and he began to have a morbid belief that he must have stolen it; he became frantic with the mere dread of guilt; he could not eat or sleep, and it was not till he went to make good the loss with a pencil which his grandfather gave him that the girl said she had found her pencil in her desk, and saved him from the despair of a self-convicted criminal. After that his father tried to teach him the need of using his reason as well as his conscience concerning himself, and not to be a little simpleton.[11]

Again, in Literary Friends and Acquaintance he reports that as a young man he was highly self-conscious and morbidly sensitive:

[10]"Scott's Jeanie Deans and Cooper's Lack of Heroines," Heroines of Fiction, I, 104.

[11]A Boy's Town, p. 198.

> In my heart I did not think that twenty-three was so very young, but perhaps it was; and if any one were to say that I had been portraying here a youth whose aims were certainly beyond his achievements, who was morbidly sensitive, and if not conceited was intolerably conscious, who had met with incredible kindness, and had suffered no more than was good for him, though he might not have merited his pain any more than his joy, I do not know that I should gainsay him, for I am not at all sure that I was not just that kind of youth when I paid my first visit to New England.[12]

This problem continued to trouble him even as he grew older. In a letter of 1904, Howells indicates to Mark Twain that he feels there is an essential difference in their respective temperaments. He then refers to the restricting effects of his own self-consciousness:

> You stir me mightily with the hope of dictating, and I will try it when I get the chance. But there is a temperamental difference. You are dramatic and unconscious; you count the thing more than yourself; I am cursed with consciousness to the core, and can't say myself out; I am always saying myself <u>in</u>, and setting myself above all that I say, as of more worth. Lately I have felt as if I were rotting with egotism. I don't admire myself; I am sick of myself; but I can't think of anything else. Here I am at it now, when I ought to be rejoicing with you at the blessing you've found.[13]

[12] <u>Literary Friends and Acquaintance</u>, p. 66.

[13] Letter of Feb. 14, 1904, in <u>Twain-Howells Letters</u>, II, 780.

In Years of My Youth he explains that he believes it was his imaginative temperament which enabled him to see more potential in reality than in make-believe about reality: " . . . I am of the imaginative temperament which has enabled me all the conscious years of my life to see reality more iridescent and beautiful, or more lurid and terrible than any make-believe about reality."[14] In the same biography he further explains that the problem of such an imagination for him was that the very fancies which he was so temperamentally qualified to envision then became so ominous that he was temperamentally incapable of controlling them. He implies that later in adulthood he actually began to lose sleep from cares of this nature: "Like everyone who lives, I was a congeries of contradictions, willing to play with the fancies that came to me, but afraid of them if they stayed too late. Yet I did not lose much sleep from them; it is after youth is gone that we begin to lose sleep from care; while our years are few we indeed rise

[14]Years of My Youth, p. 4.

up with care, but it does not wake night-long with us, as it does when our years are more."[15] This reference to rising up with care is suggestive of the highly subjective poem, "In the Dark," quoted at the beginning of this chapter. He speaks of waking from sleep at night, of searching his consciousness to find the ill. He reports that such ill is formless, vague, and fleeting--and that he himself is frantic. All of this is suggestive of the suffering from private fears, guilt, and over-conscientious introspection which Howells attributes to a temperament at once imaginative, but overly susceptible to its own self-suggestions.

This susceptibility was perhaps increased because by nature Howells was uncommonly fastidious. His acute perception of the incongruous or the crude led to a very refined development of the artistic sensibilities, but to a vulnerable exposure to emotional sensitivities. He repeatedly reports pronounced reactions to experiences which to a less sensitive person might have been less impressive. Perhaps typical is the following report of his

[15]Ibid., p. 231.

reaction to a loud voice, " . . . from the shudder which the first sound of his voice must have sent through a less fastidious substance than mine I perceived that an address by megaphone I could not have borne . . . ."[16] Perhaps even more revealing is his reaction to works of art. He is offended by statues which exaggerate the boldness of an artistic mode started by Michelangelo. It seems indicative of a temperamental sensitivity that he is relieved that "the best marbles now no longer strut or swagger or bully."[17] And perhaps the most appropriate example of Howells' refined artistic sensibilities is his observation in Roman Holidays and Others concerning the extent to which the Christian artists defeat their cause by portraying the evil associated with a religion's history, rather than the good associated with the religion itself. By contrast, the pagan religion, which perhaps actually was responsible for such cruelties, was portrayed in terms of peace and serenity:

[16]Roman Holidays and Others, p. 168.

[17]Ibid., p. 147. Howells said this about Canova.

> . . . in their presence and in the presence of so many other masterpieces in the different rooms, with their horrible miracles and atrocious martyrdoms, I realized as for the first time what a bloody religion ours was. It was such relief, such rest, to go from those broilings and beheadings and crucifixions and flayings and stabbings into the long, tranquil aisles of the museum where the marble men and women, created for earthly immortality by Greek art, welcomed me to their serenity and sanity. The earlier gods might have been the devils which the early Christians fancied them, but they did not look it; they did not look as if it was they that had loosed the terrors upon mankind out of which the true faith has but barely struggled at last, now when its relaxing grasp seems slipping from the human mind. I remembered those peaceful pagans so perfectly that I could have gone confidently to this or that and hailed him friend; and though I might not have liked to claim the acquaintance of all of them in the flesh, in the marble I fled to it as refuge from the cruel visions of Christian art.[18]

And in the same way that he fled to peaceful refuge from the cruel visions of art, he also fled to peaceful refuge from the abhorrent contacts of reality. He described this as the necessity of his morbid nerves: " . . . I think that if I had been wiser than I was then I would have remained in the employ offered me, and learned in the school of reality the many lessons of human nature which it could have taught me. I did not remain, and perhaps I could not; it might have been the necessity of my morbid nerves

[18]Ibid., p. 183.

to save themselves from abhorrent contacts . . . . ."[19]

In An Imperative Duty Howells indicates that a fruitful cause of misery in the world is a war between a person's temperament and character:

> He knew that in her hours of despondency there was that war between her temperament and her character which is the fruitful cause of misery in the world, where all strains are now so crossed and intertangled that there is no definite and unbroken direction any more in any of us. In her, the confusion was only a little greater than in most others, and if Olney ever had any regret it was that the sunny-natured antitypes of her mother's race had not endowed her with more of the heaven-born cheerfulness with which it meets contumely and injustice. His struggle was with that hypochondria of the soul into which the Puritanism of her father's race had sickened in her, and which so often seems to satisfy its crazy claim upon conscience by enforcing some aimless act of self-sacrifice.[20]

The word "temperament" refers to the natural inherited spontaneous reactions. The word "character" refers to the learned reactions imposed by the culture. In the case of the woman described above, the former is a cheerful nature inherited from the African race. The latter is a morbidly-conscientious nature inherited from the Puritanism of the Anglo-Saxon culture. It might well be suggested

[19] Years of My Youth, p. 141.

[20] An Imperative Duty, pp. 194-195.

that for Howells misery was also caused by the operations of character upon temperament. However, for Howells, the developed habits of character enhanced and exaggerated the very tendencies already natural for his temperament. By nature he was highly imaginative, uncommonly introspective, and extremely sensitive to abuse. As a product of his culture he had an overly developed conscience and was morbidly sensitive to self-suggestions. He therefore became extraordinarily sensitive, sometimes even painfully so, to personal problems both real and imagined. It was indicated in an earlier chapter, and further implied in the present chapter that Howells had a psychological tendency to shun physical violence. It is also suggested in the present chapter that he had an intellectual make-up which reinforced this tendency. He was never a "single action" man, but always one to worry himself with second thoughts. He was sensitive, not only to violence, but to aesthetic incongruities, such as the ones cited in above passages. This sensitivity markedly influenced his ability to create good art. The result is a literary artistry of very little force, but of a great deal of subtlety. What he lacks in thrust, he

gains in analysis. What he loses in depth, he gains in understanding. The reader of a Howells novel may feel poor in subjective experience, but rich in objective insight. He will be provided constantly with incisive psychological observations indicative of a very intense study of human reactions. It would be difficult to prove that the reader did not gain more than he lost while seeing the world through Howells' temperament. And it would be difficult to prove that Howells himself did not gain more than he lost as a result of his imaginative and introspective habits. If they worked in such a way as to initially cause misery, fear, and even sickness, they also worked eventually to provide self-understanding and health. The same introspective tendencies which to an unprepared child encouraged morbid soul-searching, to a thinking adult encouraged thoughtful examination of assumptions and attitudes. And the same imagination which earlier caused an inward projection of greater burdens than could be handled alone, later facilitated an outward projection of sympathies for other individuals who might be suffering.

Thus, it is Howells' particular qualities of

temperament which to a large extent enabled him to extend support to others. And to a large extent this support is extended through his particular type of art--one in which he analyzes internal problems, possibly as a part of his own process of emotional catharsis. His is the art of objective analysis of subjective processes. His purpose is not so much to increase the reader's range of experience as to help him handle the experience already given:

> . . . I cannot thank the novelist who teaches us not to know but to unknow our kind.[21]

[21]"Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, p. 55.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LITERARY THEORY

For things I fancied once that I should be
Quite in doing; but at last I see
All that I did became a part of me . . . .[1]

[1]"Peonage," Stops of Various Quills, n. p.

In the development of his artistic theory Howells was concerned with the problem of determining the relative relationships between ethics and aesthetics, between humanitarian standards and artistic standards, and between basic character qualities and sophistication concerning manners and customs. In regard to the question of ethics and aesthetics, Howells usually took the position that there is an essential connection between the two principles, and that if an artist should attempt to disregard this unity he will produce something which is somehow distorted: "It is usual to speak of the ethical and the aesthetical principles as if they were something separable; but they are hardly even divergent in any artist . . . ."[2] An observation from Letters of an Altrurian Traveller indicates this same basic unity between morality and artistry: " . . . I shrank not only from the moral, but the physical ugliness of the thing. But, in fact, do not the two kinds of ugliness go together?"[3]

[2]"The Philosophy of Tolstoy," Criticism and Fiction, p. 172.

[3]Letters of an Altrurian Traveller, p. 36.

To the extent that it is necessary that one quality be judged in preference to the other, there is no question that, for Howells, morality must be at the basis of all artistry. A work of art which is not beautiful for its artistic advancement can still be beautiful for its moral advancement. An artistic work built upon a corrupt ethical structure can never be beautiful, no matter how refined the artistic practices. Thus we find observations like the following passage concerning the standards by which to judge a story: "From the first it was noticeable that the criticism it received concerned the morality of the story, and even the morality of the writer, rather than the art of either; and, on the whole, we do not see why this was not well enough . . . . It was a better way of looking at it than a mere survey of its literary qualities would have been, and it marked an advance in popular criticism."[4] And perhaps the most colorful example of Howells' insistence upon the essential precedence which morality must take over artistry is in the following

[4]"A Social Study," Criticism and Fiction, pp. 240-241.

example from Tuscan Cities. It is what might be termed the "blood in the mortar of saints" passage, in which is underscored the essential incongruity and immorality of an ostensibly beautiful cultural expression which is based upon a decadent cultural practice:

> It is well enough for the tourist to give a thought to these facts and conditions of the times that produced the beautiful architecture of the Palazzo Communale and the wonderful frescos which illumine its dim-vaulted halls and chambers. The masters who wrought either might have mixed the mortar for their bricks, and the colors for their saints and angels, and allegories and warriors, with human blood . . . .[5]

It was indicated earlier that when the natural man observes the superficial artifices of the society man, he is then forced to appraise the respective value systems. It would appear that for Howells one result of such an appraisal was to conclude that how we think and feel--what we are--is a great deal more important than how we act--what we assume to be. However, as he observed the process by which human character is developed he recognized that how we act eventually determines our character, as well as our reputation and self-image. He therefore holds a high

[5]Tuscan Cities, p. 175.

respect for the inseparable nature of superficial and basic qualities. " . . . it is certain that our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. The price that we pay for civilization is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these."[6] And in A Hazard of New Fortunes it is observed: "It did not occur to him that his behavior was immoral; he did not realize that it was creating a reputation if not a character for him. While we are still young we do not realize that our actions have this effect. It seems to us that people will judge us from what we think and feel. Later we find out that this is impossible . . . ."[7] Therefore, the time should come when each admits: "All that I did became a part of me."[8]

As was indicated in an earlier chapter, to the extent that Howells recognizes the artist faces a potential conflict between standards of moral equalitarianism on the one hand and standards of artistic levels of

[6]The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 509.

[7]A Hazard of New Fortunes, p. 139.

[8]Refer to epigraph of this chapter.

accomplishment on the other hand, he attempts to justify the former as the more important. He therefore admires writers like Tolstoy, who "replaced the artistic conscience by the human conscience."[9] However, he recognizes the practical problem of such a solution: "The difficulty in humbling one's self to this view of art is in the ease with which one may please the general by art which is no art."[10] It therefore becomes necessary to develop a basic philosophical stance concerning, not only the purpose, but also the effect, of art. The purpose, he argues, is to portray "those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity."[11] Therefore: "Art is not produced for artists, or even for connoisseurs; it is produced for the general, who can never view it otherwise than morally, personally, partially, from their associations and preconceptions."[12] The purpose, then, is a moral one of developing

[9]"The Philosophy of Tolstoy," Criticism and Fiction, p. 172.

[10]"The What and the How in Art," Literature and Life, p. 287.

[11]"Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, pp. 66-67.

[12]"The What and the How in Art," Literature and Life, p. 286.

equalitarian standards in society as a whole by portraying those qualities of basic human worth which all individuals share. The truth of qualities portrayed becomes necessarily more important than the skill in portraying them, although as a technical matter the two may become indistinguishable. And the very fact that art will be judged by individuals who will measure its use by the way it affects them personally and morally, rather than by an impersonal abstract standard, is justification for valuing the personal and moral more than the artistic and abstract. In fact, according to Howells' view of the universe, the impersonal[13] and abstract have no real existence except as expressions of the personal and the moral. Therefore, whatever the purpose of art, its effect will be more than aesthetic. It will be ethical because the recipient will transpose it into a personal use:

> If it is true that "the object of a novel should be to charm through a faithful representation of human actions and human passions, and to create by this fidelity to nature a beautiful work," and if "the creation of the beautiful" is solely "the object of art," it never was

[13]Refer to footnote number 7 of Chapter One.

> and never can be solely its effect as long as men are men and women are women. If the race is resolved into abstract qualities, perhaps this may happen; but till then the finest effect of the "beautiful" will be ethical and not aesthetic merely. Morality penetrates all things, it is the soul of all things.[14]

The impersonal has no existence. Therefore, one must study the universe from one's self.[15] The abstract has no existence. Therefore, one can find beauty only by penetrating to basic morality. In both cases it follows that the real existence is that of the inner world. And it can be argued that this assumption is fundamental to at least one of Howells' basic theories of literary technique. It has been said that Frank Norris once referred to Howells' realism as "'the drama of the broken teacup, the adventure of an invitation to dinner . . . .'"[16] There is an implication here, often agreed to by other critics, that Howells' literary technique is one of simply reporting superficial incidents, rather than probing to

[14]"Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, pp. 41-42.

[15]Refer to footnotes 6 and 7 of chapter one.

[16]This observation was made by editors Clara Kirk and Rudolf Kirk in Criticism and Fiction, p. 278.

the real depth, the inner meaning, of human existence.[17] But whatever the truth might be as to the effect of Howells' realism, it is clear that the intention was to develop a technique which would act upon the reader's mind in such a way as to transpose superficial data into real meaning. Howells believed that the artist should work with the tangible and the superficial in such a way that he would penetrate to the intangible and the basic. He believed that there was a natural relationship between the events of the outer world and the miracles

[17]In this regard Olov W. Fryckstedt indicates in In Quest of America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 236: "It is hard to reconcile Howells' love of the trivial with his genuine concern with the great problems of human existence." A similar argument is phrased by C. Hartley Grattan in "Howells: Ten Years After" in Kenneth Eble's Howells: A Century of Criticism (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1962), p. 113, when he refers to Howells' method as one "which sacrificed the penetrating analysis of mankind to accuracy in the rendition of externals." Edwin H. Cady, in his article "The Neuroticism of William Dean Howells," PMLA, LXI (1946), 237, suggests that "battle as he might on the abstract, intellectual planes, Howells always drew back from the consideration of disturbing facts." Edd Winfield Parks, in "A Realist Avoids Reality: W. D. Howells and the Civil War Years;" South Atlantic Quarterly, LII (1953), 93, argues that "entirely through his own volition, Howells was bent on avoiding too close a contact with reality."

of the inner world. He believed that the substantive held the key to the insubstantive. Such a conviction is expressed in the passage, " . . . but I do not at all mean that character is rendered superficial by bringing everything in it to the surface. I am far too fond of the plain light of day for that; but still it may be so contrived that the plain light of day may strike to the nethermost abysses, and that what is most intricate and most recondite in the soul may be rendered luminously apparent at its proper depth."[18] Again, in a private letter, he indicates that his own efforts in fiction were to find the inner meaning of life by working with the materials of the surface:

> But I am not sorry for having wrought in common, crude material so much; that is the right American stuff; and perhaps hereafter, when my din is done, if any one is curious to know what that noise was, it will be found to have proceeded from a small insect which was scraping about on the surface of our life and trying to get into its meaning for the sake of the other insects larger or smaller. That is, such has been my unconscious work; consciously I was always as I still am, trying to fashion a piece of literature out of the life next at hand.[19]

[18]"Mrs. Humphry Ward's Heroines," Heroines of Fiction, II, 272.

[19]To Charles Eliot Norton, April 26, 1903, in Life in Letters, II, 173.

And in Criticism and Fiction he defends Valdes for his theories that an artist should discover "ideas in things." The following is a statement by Valdes quoted by Howells:

> " . . . every day we see a thousand pictures in life, that do not make any impression upon us, or if they make any it is one of repugnance; but let the novelist come, and without betraying the truth, but painting them as they appear to his vision, he produces a most interesting work, whose perusal enchants us. That which in life left us indifferent, or repelled us, in art delights us. Why? Simply because the artist has made us see the idea that resides in it. Let not the novelists, then, endeavor to add anything to reality, to turn and twist it, to restrict it. Since nature has endowed them with this precious gift of discovering ideas in things, their work will be beautiful if they paint these as they appear."[20]

In another instance he explains that the material facts of our economic life can be treated in fiction only to the extent that "such wonders of the outer world can be related to the miracles of the inner world. Fiction can deal with the facts of finance and industry and invention only as the expressions of character; otherwise these things are wholly dead."[21]

[20]"Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, pp. 37-38.

[21]"The Future of the American Novel," Criticism and Fiction, p. 346.

How deeply based was Howells' personal conviction concerning this relationship between the tangible, material world and the intangible, spiritual world is difficult to determine. But there is evidence which suggests that such a world view was fundamental to the religious philosophy taught to him by his father during his childhood. In regard to a completely different point, one of Howells' critics quotes a most revealing passage from a Swedenborgian paper edited by William Cooper Howells: "'The Retina,' he said, 'is the expression of the optic nerve . . . and its use is to convey to the mind the images of objects in the material world . . . . It is thus we wish to use our RETINA . . . to impress upon it the forms of things within the soul's vision . . .'"[22] It might well be, then, that this most strategic aspect of Howells' theory of literary realism--that of the necessary relationship between the tangible and intangible world--is a logical outgrowth of a philosophical world-view taught to him by his father.

[22]Edwin H. Cady, The Road to Realism . . . (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1956), p. 18. In regard to The Retina, Cady indicates: "No equally objective source of evidence exists concerning the intellectual, moral, metaphysical, and emotional climate in which his children were brought up." p. 17.

It may be as deep-seated as the religious and moral views also developed initially in childhood. It might well be argued, then, that in the same way that Howells' moral theories are grounded to some extent in his highly individual emotional responses, his literary theories are grounded in his highly individual visual perception. Even before his literary theories were highly developed he was accustomed to believing he could perceive inwardly, in proportion as he could see outwardly. His is a descriptive world, but not a superficial world. It is a world suggestive of that described in the articles of The Retina. "The whole natural world is a type or image of the spiritual world," says one contributor, "and all things exist in the former, are representative of things existing in the latter. This great truth is declared by the Apostle, when he says, 'The invisible things of them from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made.'"[23] Another contributor explains that in order to perceive the abstract truth, the human mind must see the

[23]Rev. T. O. Prescott, "Sermon on Daniel VII," The Retina, ed. William Cooper Howells (Hamilton, Ohio), May 31, 1844, p. 289.

external form. "There can exist no quality without an appropriate form. Even the abstract qualities of flexibility and expansion, are represented in the mind, by the form of bodies bending and enlarging. The mind cannot fix upon love or wisdom, as an object, without a representation of a form in which those qualities exist. So, every quality must either be represented in the mind, by the form of the name conveying the quality, or in the image of things containing it."[24] This process of learning is further explained in a translation of one of Swedenborg's works:

> The power of divining true principles by the mind alone, and descending therefrom, in the path of certainty, through their consequences, to posterior things, belongs exclusively to higher beings and powers; to spirits, angels, and the Omniscient Himself, who indeed inhabit the brightest light, and dwell in essential truth and wisdom. They see all things, in one complex, us at once beneath them and within them: they view the last things from the first, the lowest from the highest, the outermost from the innermost; in a word, all the circumferences from the centre; consequently, the very effects of the world, from their causes. Not so human minds, which derive from the senses, or absorb through the senses, all the materials which they have to reason upon.--For we are born in dense ignorance; in process of time organs are opened for us, and ways prepared, and images themselves are

[24]"The Doctrine of Correspondences: Explained and Proved," The Retina, June 7, 1844, p. 115. From the Errand Boy.

> sublimated, until they become ideas, and at length reasons; which when connected into series, are brought under the inspection of the reasoning power. Thus by slow degrees only, judgment is developed and reason displayed. This then is man's only way of attaining truths, so long as his soul lives in the body.[25]

Such viewpoints are representative of the philosophy Howells learned from his father for whom he said it was easy "to conceive all tangible and visible creation as an adumbration of spiritual reality; to accept revelation as the mask of interior meanings . . . ."[26] And such viewpoints are suggestive of Howells' own conviction that the only real existence is that of the inner world, which one may discover by dealing with the outer world. It was indicated in an earlier chapter that although Howells was very much influenced by the Swedenborgian philosophy as a child, he was unable to accept the theological precepts of this philosophy as an adult. It should be indicated here, however, that although he rejected the specific theological

[25]"Swedenborg's Animal Kingdom," The Retina, Dec. 29, 1843, p. 115. From the N. J. Mag.

[26]Howells, W. D., ed. Recollections of Life in Ohio from 1813 to 1840, by William Cooper Howells (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1895), p. vi.

aspects of this philosophy, he retained its general metaphysical outlook. And these convictions concerning the make-up of the universe and the process of human learning apparently became strategic to the development of his theory of realism. Specifically, the view that the real existence is that of the inner world, discovered through the outer world, may well be the basis for both aspects of literary theory discussed so far in this chapter. It is suggestive of the rationale implied in the conviction that the ethical should dominate the aesthetic, or that beauty exists only insofar as it is a reflection of basic morality. And it is suggestive of a literary technique which attempts to probe the inner world by making use of the outer world.

In an attempt to articulate the distinction between bad and good romanticism, Howells defined the words "romanticistic" and "romantic." "Romanticism," he says, "tries for the visionary effect in actual conditions." "Romance," on the other hand, "seeks the effect of reality

in visionary conditions."[27] It might well be argued that for Howells "realism" seeks the effect of reality in actual conditions. Howells does not seek the magic of the visionary world at all, either initially or ultimately. He does acknowledge the existence of a mystical or spiritual world. But he believes that it is through the use of the tangible and the measurable that we penetrate to the mysteries of the universe--or of the human soul. He believes that literature is a precise art, in which exact meanings are conveyed from mind to mind with such absolute control that the insight for the reader will be of the same quality and form that it was originally for the writer:

> Literature is at once the most intimate and the most articulate of the arts. It cannot impart its effect through the senses or the nerves as the other arts can; it is beautiful only through the intelligence; it is mind speaking to the mind; until it has been put in absolute terms, of an invariable significance, it does not exist at all. It cannot awaken this emotion in one, and that in another; if it fails to express precisely the meaning of the author, if it does not say <u>him</u>, it says

[27]"Hawthorne's Hester Prynne," <u>Heroines of Fiction</u>, I, 162.

> nothing, and is nothing. So that when a poet has put his heart, much or little, into a poem, and sold it to a magazine, the scandal is greater than when a painter has sold a picture to a patron, or a sculptor has modelled a statue to order. These are artists less articulate and less intimate than the poet; they are more exterior to their work; they are less personally in it; they part with less of themselves in the dicker.[28]

It is quite probable that many critics would disagree with this definition of literature. But, whatever its value, it does indicate something strategic to the understanding of Howells' technique. He does not place a high premium on suggestive emotional data. He does not normally build levels of illusion to suggest his meaning, nor does he build a veil of mystery around his reality. He does deal in levels. But he believes that to penetrate to the inner layer of spiritual reality one must work with the layer of measurable quantities, be they material objects or precise mental concepts. "Our average is practical as well as mystical; it is first the dust of the earth, and then it is a living soul; it likes great questions simply and familiarly presented, before it puts its

[28]"A Tale of the Heroic Age," Criticism and Fiction, p. 299.

faith in them and makes its faith a life. It likes to start to heaven from home . . . ."[29] This is suggestive of Swedenborg's statement:

> " . . . the mind, deeping along the path of analysis, founds and rears her palace, not in the air, or in an atmosphere too high for her, which is not her element, and where there is no support, still less foundation; but on solid ground.
>
> This is the only way to principles and truths--to high and almost to heavenly things--and no other appears to be open to us earthborn men . . . ."[30]

Howells' world is a subjective world measured by objective data. And in his fiction may be found many examples of the technique of gathering up tangible data in order to reveal fleeting glimpses of the inner truth. Such a technique is revealed in the following description from "The Eidolons of Brooks Alford" of an emotionally ill man who is subject to the almost primitive fascination for visual images. It may be asserted that the description deals with trivia. But what the trivia indicate opens another page of reality. For here the most common sort of

[29]"The Romantic Imagination," Criticism and Fiction, p. 254.

[30]"Swedenborg's Animal Kingdom," The Retina, Dec. 29, 1843, p. 116.

observation indicates the most uncommon workings of the human mind.

> But when they asked him in his quality of nervous wreck whether he had not suffered from the prolonged and repeated explosions, too, he found himself able to say no, that he had enjoyed every moment of the firing. He added that he did not believe he had even noticed the noise after the first shot, he was so wholly taken with the beauty of the fountain-burst from the sea which followed; and as he spoke the fanlike spray rose and expanded itself before his eyes, quite blotting out the visage of a young widow across the table. In his swift recognition of the fact and his reflection upon it, he realized that the effect was quite as if he had been looking at some intense light, almost as if he had been looking at the sun, and that the illusion which had blotted out the agreeable reality opposite was of the quality of those flying shapes which repeat themselves here, there, and everywhere that one looks, after lifting the gaze from a dazzling object. When his consciousness had duly registered this perception, there instantly followed a recognition of the fact that the eidolon now filling his vision was not the effect of the dazzled eyes, but of a mental process of thinking how the thing which it reported had looked.[31]

Perhaps another such example is the pile-driving scene in The Rise of Silas Lapham. It is a scene of tangible descriptive data which betrays Silas Lapham's basic suscepti-

[31]"The Eidolons of Brooks Alford," Between the Dark and the Daylight, p. 67.

bility to the primitive appeal of power, an appeal strategically important to the man's character:

> Nothing gave Lapham so much satisfaction in the whole construction of his house as the pile-driving. When this began, early in the summer, he took Mrs. Lapham every day in his buggy and drove round to look at it; stopping the mare in front of the lot, and watching the operation with even keener interest than the little loafing Irish boys who superintended it in force. It pleased him to hear the portable engine chuckle out a hundred thin whiffs of steam in carrying the big iron weight to the top of the framework above the pile, then seem to hesitate, and cough once or twice in pressing the weight against the detaching apparatus. There was a moment in which the weight had the effect of poising before it fell; then it dropped with a mighty whack on the ironbound head of the pile, and drove it a foot into the earth.[32]

The Rise of Silas Lapham is a fitting example of Howells' technique for still another reason. For in the character of Silas Lapham we see a separation between aesthetic and social discretion on the one hand and basic moral discretion on the other hand. Silas has almost none of the former, but he proves to have a great deal of the latter. Much of the dramatic effect of the novel

[32]The Rise of Silas Lapham, p. 59.

depends upon an understanding of the essential conflict of these two value systems. Much of the emotional effect depends upon the reader's perception of the pathos associated with a character who is painfully aware of his lack of cultural sophistication. And much of the moral effect depends upon the reader's acceptance of the conclusion that a person's moral growth and moral actions are more important than his aesthetic, social, or economic advancement.

In A Chance Acquaintance the question of social and aesthetic refinement was more closely woven to that of moral refinement. For the character Kitty these qualities were so identified that the social question of whether her fiance introduces her to his fashionable friends is of strategic importance because it indicates a certain moral stance. Failure to make a proper introduction is regarded as failure to respect her equal social value. In regard to Kitty's indignation over this event, Henry James once said that she was too pert. Howells answered that she had to appear that way, but that it was she who was

right.[33] Yet the novel might well be regarded as a little unsatisfactory in the way James mentioned. The basic problem is in the limitations of Howells' theories of literary artistry. He believes that one can give a glimpse of the basic truth by showing a strategic action involving surface events. If this technique had been used to show only temporary motivation, it might have worked. But it is used to show an ultimate truth. The reader is asked to recognize that this one event represents a continuing character trait. He is asked, for purposes of literary economy, to recognize that this one apparently insignificant social gesture is a key to a whole system of moral values. And in the novel itself this is precisely what Howells has Kitty do. However, in doing so, Kitty appears to ignore the possibility that Arburton might adjust

[33]See Letter of March 10, 1873, in Life in Letters, I, 174-175. Howells explains, "Her pertness was but another proof of the contrariness of her sex. I meant her to be everything that was lovely, and went on protesting that she was so, but she preferred being saucy to the young man, especially in that second number . . . . She cannot very well help 'sassing' him, though she feels that this puts her at a disadvantage, and makes her seem the aggressor. I have tried to let this explain itself to the reader as much as I can; but it is a kind of thing that scarcely admits of dramatic demonstration, and I feel that the whole thing is weighed down with comment."

to correct his actions. On the "realistic" level this action is representative of all his future actions, many of which would have strategic importance to the relationship between them. But on the "actual" level, this is merely one gesture, representative of a social habit which might be changed. Viewed on the level of actuality, Kitty, who seems to be refusing him on the basis that he is arbitrary and intolerant--appears so herself because after one minor incident she is unwilling to either forgive or reappraise. It was argued earlier that one aspect of Howells' technique is to find realism through actuality. It might be argued now that the problem with finding reality through actuality is that the two levels are so similar in appearance that the reader may not recognize that they are still distinctly different. The task, then, for a realist of Howells' school, is to so recognize this probability that he either builds in clues to the distinction, or he so well correlates the actual with the real that there is no conflict if one reads the work on the level of actuality. If the realist fails to do this he runs into the most ironic trap of having a work that seems "unrealistic"--for it will be

unrealistic on the actual level, even though it represents basic truths.

The extent to which Howells might have recognized the nature of this problem is difficult to determine. It is certain that he recognized the task of realism as a very complex one. An example is in the very subtle irony with which he treats this problem in A Foregone Conclusion. Early in the novel Ferris argues on behalf of realism in art. He indicates that one has the obligation to give a man credit for the full scope of character qualities--rather than label him with "tawdry accessories" which give him a limited focus.[34] He argues this in regard to the assumptions which the artist makes about his subject. The tragedy is that when these same characters are involved in a real life episode, Ferris is no more able than anyone else to allow that his subject, the priest, had all of the human qualities of manliness, and was not to be measured by cheap romantic notions concerning priesthood.[35] It is almost as if Howells is suggesting a problem for the

[34] A Foregone Conclusion. See especially pp. 74-75.

[35] Ibid., pp. 263-265.

realist--that of relating artistry to reality, or of relating technical principles to practical use.

It has been suggested that much of Howells' ostensibly superficial treatment of fictional materials is founded in a philosophy which relates tangible materials to intangible concepts. It was suggested specifically that his assumption that the universe is so constructed led to a deliberate technique which attempted to relate superficial paraphernalia to basic insights--or, to phrase it another way--he believed the insubstantive could be better grasped to the extent that it was explored through the medium of the substantive. In light of this the following debate between Howells and Henry James is curious. Howells argues:

> "After leaving out all those novelistic 'properties,' as sovereigns, courts, aristocracy, gentry, castles, cottages, cathedrals, abbeys, universities, museums, political class, Epsoms, and Ascots, by the presence of which Mr. James suggests our poverty to the English conception, we have the whole of human life remaining, and a social structure presenting the only fresh and novel opportunities left to fiction, opportunities manifold and inexhaustible."[36]

[36]Fryckstedt, p. 250.

To this James answers:

> "It is our manners, customes, usages, habits, forms, upon all these things matured and established, that a novelist lives--they are the very stuff his work is made of; and in saying that in the absence of those 'dreary and worn-out paraphernalia' which I enumerate as being wanting in American society, 'we have simply the whole of human life left,' you beg (to my sense) the question. I should say we had just so much less of it as these same 'paraphernalia' represent, and I think they represent an enormous quantity of it."[37]

In the above argument there are, of course, more issues at stake than are being discussed here. They were speaking of completely different types of "paraphernalia." Yet it would appear that, to a great extent, James is answering with the very reasoning I had attributed to Howells himself. It is almost as if James profited by Howells, whereas Howells himself was too close to his own theories to realize when he was departing from them.

In a justification of both the contributions and limitations of Balzac, Howells once said, " . . . one perceives that Balzac lived too soon to profit by Balzac."[38]

[37] Ibid.

[38] "Criticism and Fiction," Criticism and Fiction, p. 16.

For the pioneer in American Realism it might well be said, "One perceives that Howells lived too soon to profit by Howells."

Conclusion

Perhaps the most strategic factor in Howells' equalitarian theories is his insistence upon the value of human support. And perhaps if one were to over-simplify the conclusions of the preceding chapters it might be argued that each chapter attempts to probe a different aspect of the development of this value system. It was indicated in Chapter One that the obligation to support other human beings was taught to Howells as a part of his religious heritage. It was illustrated that the effect of such teaching was to establish a certain religious dependence which was emotionally based, and to establish a moral theory which was still merely derived externally. At this stage, then, the moral obligation to support others was merely theory, although it became a frame of reference for later moral development. In Chapter Two it was indicated that eventually the whole emotional and religious underpinning of the Swedenborgian Christianity crumbled from under him--and that as he lost the emotional support of private religious experience, he began to depend more upon the support of shared human experience. The earlier emotional dependence

upon a relationship with the Deity was transposed into an emotional dependence upon the relationship with other human beings. At this stage, then, the moral theory had become internalized. At the same time, other factors were operating upon the personality in such a way as to reinforce this attraction to the value of human support. In Chapter Three it was illustrated that Howells was extremely sensitive to the abuses of domination, even in very subtle forms. It was further indicated that it was of strategic importance to him to define "strength," not as force, but as a moral quality which enables one to lend support to others. Here, the value of human support became important not so much for what it was, as for what it was not. It had a negative value in that it provided an acceptable definition for "strength," which in other forms might be so intolerable as to become emotionally upsetting. In the first three chapters, then, the value of human support was viewed--first as a theory, second as an emotional substitute, and third as a contrast to something unacceptable. However, in Chapter Three it was also illustrated that Howells had an uncommonly high personal need for the close emotional

support of those around him. Here the support of humanity became important for its own sake. In Chapter Four such support actually became a necessity. It was Howells' sole answer to pain and death. Human unity was viewed as both the balm and the reason for human suffering that would otherwise be unbearable. Thus, for a number of reasons very personally based, Howells had an attraction to the value of human support.

Having established a value system emphasizing the moral obligation to serve the needs of others, Howells then found it necessary to deal with other value systems which seemed to offer potential conflict. Thus, we find, as was indicated in Chapter Five, that one purpose of the Altrurian economic system was to eliminate the conflict between this moral obligation to others and the private obligation to one's self. Howells believed that the elimination of economic chance would help free the individual for service to others. Thus, Howells' economic theory has a direct basis in his theories concerning one's obligation to serve others. Chapter Six reviewed a similar conflict concerning the position of the artist in society. It was argued that much of

Howells' concern for the position of the artist in an equalitarian order can be traced to his own interest in solving the dilemma between the artist's need to develop his professional values through reference to a stratified cultural standard and his obligation to develop his personal values through reference to an equalitarian moral standard. He concluded that the moral obligation to serve humanity took precedence. Thus Howells' theories concerning the obligations of the artist are directly related to his personal interest in the moral obligation to serve others.

Chapter Seven reviewed the influences of Howells' culture, particularly as they operated upon the predispositions of his temperament. It was illustrated that the developed habits of character enhanced and exaggerated the very tendencies already natural for his temperament. However, it was also indicated that there was a movement from personal sensitivity to objective detachment, a trend also indicated in other chapters. More specifically it was indicated that the same imagination which caused an inward projection of greater burdens than could be handled alone,

later facilitated an outward projection of sympathies for other individuals who might be suffering. Thus Howells' particular qualities of temperament to a large extent enabled him to support others according to a value system he already felt committed to.

Howells dealt with another potential conflict in values when he reviewed the relative importance of artistry and morality in his theories of literary technique and responsibility. In Chapter Eight it was indicated that, in a sense, the moral theory dominated the artistic theory. Thus, even the emphasis upon morality in Howells' literary theory was based in part upon his very personal concern with the obligation to serve others.

As has been indicated, this constant concern with the value of human support is perhaps the most strategic factor in Howells' equalitarian theories--theories which in turn greatly influenced his literary, social, and political thinking. In the preface it was hypothesized that Howells' theories of equality were an outgrowth of a specific temperamental need. It can be concluded here that the chief temperamental need was the need for the support of other human beings. This need was developed through the

interaction of a number of factors explored in this paper--through inherited temperament, through personal emotional experiences, through instruction of his childhood, through the religious influences upon his culture, and through the practical opportunity to observe opposing cultural systems. It has been illustrated that the same equalitarian ideas which eventually influenced Howells' social, economic, political, and literary theories were to a great extent a result of this emotional predisposition. Thus, even before he read political, social, economic, and literary tracts which lent form to his theories, he was attracted to these equalitarian concepts.

> In middle life we often forget, amidst the accumulations of experience, how early the main bases of it were laid in our consciousness.[1]

[1] An Imperative Duty, p. 103.

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